

What Is and Should Never Be

by Anonymonimus

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Summary: Ford has lost his life; his soul having been casted into the depths of the Void " a place from which not even the most powerful deity could be able to retrieve it. It has been three months since then. Bill is still nowhere to be found and the twins are finally returning to Gravity Falls during their reading week. THREEQUEL to: Two Minutes to Midnight and The Executioner's Song

1. Leave Together

The teacher was speaking animatedly in front of the whole class. She was passing across the front, gesticulating wildly and with such passion one could only be enthralled with the information she was conveying. And yet Dipper had never been more disinterested. He tried to pay attention, but he just couldn't. He had been numb ever since he left Gravity Falls with Mabel. Entering university; attending fascinating lectures tying into his mythical studies program should have been fascinating, exciting and enthralling, but the truth was the complete opposite. Life had lost its spark. Everything seemed bleak, and focusing had become something akin to impossible. The voices of his teachers would become distant muffles as Dipper would quickly lose himself in his mind, replaying the events of his latest summer in Gravity Falls.

A little over a year ago, Tad Strange, a crazed Warlock, attempted to destroy the world. He only laid waste to a majority of Gravity Falls before he was stopped. Bill had been able to remedy the damage he made and bring back those he had killed. Little did they know, the demon's actions had attracted the attention of a Grim Reaper which quickly led to much chaos during the previous summer. Hell bent on reversing Bill's mass resurrection, seen as a disturbance to the natural order, the creature took possession of Robbie Valentino and reaped the souls of those having been revived. Finding a way to stop the Grim Reaper had been rather difficult, and the task itself risky. Narrowly avoiding death once, not all of them had been able to do it

a second time during their final confrontation. Ford had lost his life; his soul having been casted into the depths of the Void " a place from which not even the most powerful deity could be able to retrieve it.

Dipper often dreamt of the dreadful tragedy as well. The brunet had swapped nightmares of being chased by Tad Strange for watching his great uncle Ford, his idol, die over and over again. Sometimes, Ford would get the chance to speak his final words and more times than not he would blame Dipper for not having been able to save him. He felt guilty. The Grim Reaper had given him the opportunity to dissuade his family's endeavour, to convince them to let the creature do its job and spend a normal summer, but he had failed and Ford had paid the ultimate price. Bill was still nowhere to be found. Dipper's heart always gave a painful throb when he dared think about the demon. He could still hear his anguished screams in his mind.

"With that said, I'll end there for today." The teacher declared, snapping the teen out of his thoughts. Low chattering quickly filled the room as hundreds of students packed away their computers and papers into their bags, "Our midterm will take place in the second class coming back from your reading week. I would like to remind you that this isn't a vacation period, this is a study period. Have a good week and study hard."

Dipper lowered his eyes, ready to reach for his binder when he noticed he hadn't pulled it out to take notes. Again. He must have zoned out as soon as he took a seat in the back row as he always did. He leaned back in his chair in disappointment and sighed. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about the midterm considering he hadn't paid attention to most of the classes. Perhaps he simply ought to drop out for the semester. He was still mourning and wasn't much in a state to focus on his lessons. Maybe it would do him some good to give himself a break and attend classes in the second semester. However, Dipper knew he wouldn't leave his room if he went through with it.

The brunet grabbed his bag and shrugged it on his shoulder. He followed the sea of students out of the class and through the halls. He had attended his last seminar of the week and was now officially beginning his reading week. Mabel had begun hers the day before " having no courses to attend on Fridays. She was likely waiting after him in their apartment with their bags ready. Despite it being a time to study and work on projects, Dipper and Mabel had decided to return to Gravity Falls and spend the week with Grunkle Stan. Though they spoke to the man on a weekly basis, both twins were eager to return to that Oregon town lost in the forest if only to give him company for a short week. They had booked seats on the earliest bus they could take to Gravity Falls and Dipper had to hurry home.

He walked to the campus station and hopped on the first bus that brought him remotely close to the apartment he and Mabel had moved into. Their decision to move out had been made at the last second. Initially, the twins had planned to stay with their parents during their studies, but neither had foreseen Ford's death. Seeing as Stan's twin's existence as well as their crazy adventures were unknown to their parents, they wouldn't understand their children's grief. Thus, to avoid any form of confrontation, Dipper and Mabel moved away. Their new home was a little over thirty minutes away from their university and though it was located downtown, they had managed

to score a flat for a rather cheap price. A third roommate was consequently unnecessary and the twins preferred it that way. They didn't have to worry about accidentally spilling their secrets and Mabel was free to use her magic as much as she pleased.

The bus pulled to a stop and Dipper hopped off. He was at a ten minute walking distance from his apartment which he could see peaking over the other tall buildings in the area. He made his way back fairly quickly and, as expected, Mabel had been waiting for him. He found their suitcases placed by the door and his sister lounging about in their sad excuse for a living room. The area was mostly empty with stained wall paper steadily peeling itself from the walls, rickety floor boards, and little to no furniture. They had no TV, instead they had a small coffee table next to a charger on which they placed a laptop. Their flat was conveniently close to a Starbucks and they were able to mooch off the Wi-Fi connection. Mabel was lying on her back on the sofa, carving drawings into the ceiling with her magic.

"Sup." She greeted evenly without sparing a look in his direction. She seemed very focused on her drawing.

"I'm probably going to flunk witchcraft but whatever." He shrugged his answer as he passed through the living room. Under different circumstances, Dipper might have been more panicked at the thought of potentially failing a class. At the moment, it was hard to care about something that was admittedly mundane. "I saw that you made my suitcase; thanks." He added, "I'll take a shower and then I'll be ready to go."

"Sounds good." Mabel said, "You've got twenty minutes."

Dipper nodded and marched into his room. He tossed his bag onto his messy bed and quickly began pulling off his clothes. "So how was your day?" he asked as he did so.

"Uneventful." Mabel replied, "I kind of just doodled all over the ceiling the whole day."

"Any projects you need to work on during reading week?" Dipper asked, stumbling out of his pants.

"Probably." Mabel shrugged, "I'm in the same boat as you, brobro. I can't pay attention. It doesn't matter that it's literally the most amazing and interesting thing to me; my mind just wanders off."

University had evidently not turned out to be the fantastic experience everyone had told them it would be. Then again, no one could have anticipated that the twins would have been mourning the all too recent death of their great uncle. Ford's absence was very noticeable — probably more so with Bill gone as well.

Dipper glanced at the ground with a frown. "It's not your fault, you know." He muttered and he knew his sister could hear him. The walls were very thin.

"It doesn't feel that way." Mabel smirked bitterly, "What's all this magic good for if I can't protect those I love, you know?"

Dipper bit his lower lip. He wished his sister didn't feel guilty like he did. He wished he could make that terrible feeling go away. She probably blamed herself given her unstable mood at the time. Unlocking her magical potential had rendered her rather irritable and rash. Maybe she thought, had she been more level headed and like her normal self, she could have found a way to prevent Ford's death. Of course, that likely wouldn't have changed anything. After all, it was Dipper's fault. Dipper was responsible. Dipper had failed.

"Heyâ€|" Mabel began quietly after a moment of nothing, "Doâ€|do you think we'll see Bill when we go back?"

Bill hadn't given any of them even the most remote sign he was still around. Stan hadn't heard anything from him either. The demon had simply vanished. For all they knew, he could have returned to his dimension or fled to a different one. That being said, Dipper hoped they would see him again. Grieving alone, especially the loss of a lover, wasn't the best idea. Bill needed to be around people for support, whether he knew it or not.

Bill needed them

Bill needed his family.

"I don't know." Dipper answered frankly as he pulled on his bathrobe, "I hope we do."

"Me tooâ€|" Mabel mumbled as her brother walked to their shared bathroom.

He took a quick shower, forcing himself not to wander back to the tragedy of that terrible summer like he always did when he had a second to think. He cleaned himself thoroughly before leaving the warm water and drying himself. Then he pulled on some fresh clothes and he and Mabel left. Next stop: Gravity Falls.

* * *

><p>This story will update every day until it is done.

2. As The Soft Walls Eat Us Alive

There was utter and complete darkness for too long. And then there was Ford. He was standing just a few feet in front of Dipper with his back turned to him. The teen felt his heart thumping harshly against his chest as he beheld his deceased great uncle. Slowly, Ford turned to face him and Dipper held his breath. His skin was deathly pale â€" practically grey â€" and his eyes were pitch black. He looked at him with disappointment and spite._

"Dipperâ€|" he muttered, "You did this to meâ€|you didn't save me when you had the chanceâ€|"_"

"No, Iâ€"" Dipper tried but his voice cracked. He didn't know what to say._

"It's your fault!" Ford roared and he was suddenly inches away from

his face as he continued yelling: "It's all your fault! You could have prevented this! The Grim Reaper gave you a chance! You killed me! _You killed me!_"_

"You killed him!_" Bill growled and Dipper spun around to find the demon, teeth barred and hands blazing with blue fire. "You _took_ him from me!"_

"Dipper."

The brunet's heart felt like it was breaking. He looked back at his great uncle, finding his grey skin had darkened considerably just before turning to ashes. "No!" Dipper cried and reached out to catch some of the ashes, but they disappeared as soon as they touched his hands. "No! Wait! Come back! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Iâ€""_

"_Sorry isn't going to bring him back, Pine Tree." Bill hissed, now standing where Ford had once stood._

"_Bill, Iâ€|" Dipper tried again but his voice broke as he began to cry, "I'm sorry, please come homeâ€|"_"_

The demon abruptly lunged forward and clasped a tight grip around Dipper's neck. He squeezed tightly and dug his nails into his skin. The brunet struggled to breathe and clutched at Bill's arm. "You don't get to ask that of me," Bill barked, "Not after you killed him! You'll burn for this!"

The fire engulfing the blonde's hands suddenly spread to Dipper. The pain was intense. He felt like his skin was melting. He tried to scream but no sound left him. Everything hurt.

"Dipper."

"_I hate you. I hate you so much." Bill hissed cruelly._

"Dipper."

"_I'll never forgive you."_

Dipper woke up with a sharp gasp and sat up in a jolt. He breathed heavily and clutched his chest as though the action would steady the mad beating of his heart. Another nightmare. This time, it featured Bill.

"Dipper." Mabel repeated softly and gently placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, uh, I-I just had a nightmare." He admitted sheepishly. She frowned, likely ready to question him further, but he didn't want to talk about it. "What's up? Why did you wake me up?"

Mabel seemed to deliberate whether she would pursue an inquiry about his nightmare, but conceded to his silent plea instead. She gestured the window next to her with her chin, "We're here." She said just as they passed the Gravity Falls sign.

The bus drove into town shortly after. More people than either twin were expecting were walking around the downtown area. The sun was

setting, bathing the buildings in orange, red, and yellow. Dipper's heart gave a painful throb. His feeling of grief intensified as he watched the familiar sights pass him by. It was nostalgic in a way. So many good memories were tied to the numerous streets of Gravity Falls, but they were all tarnished by Ford's absence. The town had lost an integral part of its beauty and wonder. It would never be the same.

"It's pretty like this; especially in the Fall." Mabel commented seemingly on a different wave length, her eyes glued to the outside. She then took her brother's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze before turning her gaze to him and offering a melancholic smile, "We'll be okay." She whispered, her voice strained from emotion. It was then he knew his sister felt just as wounded by their return as he did, though made an effort to remain positive.

"Yeah, we will." Dipper agreed and returned the tender squeeze.

The bus pulled into the bus station. They passed by the parking lot and spotted Soos and Melody standing next to their vehicle. They smiled brightly and waved at the bus as it drove in front of them. The twins quickly returned the gesture. They were thus greeted by the two as they stepped off the automobile and gathered their suitcases.

"Dudes!" Soos exclaimed heartily as he pulled them both into a tight hug, "Man, I missed you guys!"

"Hey Soos." Dipper smiled as he wiggled out of his embrace, "Hi Melody," he added and gave her a quick hug, "Thanks for picking us up."

"Yeah, it was really nice of you." Mabel chimed and hugged Melody as well.

"It was our pleasure!" Melody assured with a charming giggle, "How's university going?"

The twins exchanged an uneasy look. "Wellâ€¦ish." They answered simultaneously.

"Ah, I love it when you do the twin talkie thing." Soos sighed contentedly, not having picked up on their tone, "I wish I had a twin."

"What if it was evil?" Melody asked.

"Then I would have to defeat it to save the world. The showdown would be epic." Soos replied seriously. "But I would be a changed man."

"That's so noble of you." Melody chuckled, "Anyway," she continued as she turned back to Mabel and Dipper, "Are you two hungry? We could stop by Greasy's. Our treat."

"That sounds nice." Mabel smiled, "We ought to pick something up for Grunkle Stan too. Lord knows he won't be cooking anything for himself."

Dipper's mind momentarily wandered to how Ford had accidentally

created life last summer in an attempt to cook a meal. He still had no idea what became of that grey sentient being.

"How's he doing, by the way?" Dipper asked, shaking his head briefly to chase the memory away.

"Stan?" Soos repeated and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck, "He's doing fine, I guess."

"You guess?" Mabel repeated worriedly.

"It'sâ€¦it's sort of strangeâ€¦" Soos admitted, "I don't think he's doing too badly but I don't really know because he doesn't leave the Mystery Shack often."

"He doesn't hang around people either." Melody added and Soos seemed saddened, "We swung by a few times in the past months to drop off groceries and offer to help around the house, but he never really keeps us around for too long. We understand that he might want to be alone butâ€¦we're worried."

"Thanks for coming back, dudes." Soos said softly, "It means a lot that he won't be so alone anymore."

"We'll make sure he's alright." Mabel smiled encouragingly, "Before we leave to go back home, we'll also make him swear that he'll let you two take care of him, even just a little."

"We promise." Dipper concluded.

The twins dragged their luggage to Soos and Melody's car, lugging it in the trunk before hopping into the back seats. Soos chatted happily about what he and his fiancÃ©e had been up to during the past few months. He updated them on what had been going on with the town; the new policies Mayor Cutebiker instilled, recreational activities and celebrations scheduled for the upcoming week, and all that jazz. He also mentioned that he and Melody were having a gnome problem â€" the little buggers were obsessively stealing their left socks for some reason. Dipper assured he would check into it at some point during the week.

They stopped at Greasy's and picked up some food to go. Mabel and Dipper made sure to get Stan his favourite meal from the place. "Hey, you kids tell that kooky uncle of yours to stop by sometime soon!" Lazy Susan told them as they left, "I haven't seen him in a while!"

"We will!" Mabel promised and waved.

Their final stop was at the Mystery Shack. It was strange returning to it after nearly three months of having been away. The building seemed so different â€" it hardly felt like home anymore. Dipper reckoned it was because two important people were gone now, one of which would definitely never return. He sighed deeply and thought about Bill. He hadn't spoken to Stan in the past week and despite having gotten no news from the demon all those weeks before, perhaps something had changed the past several days. However, Dipper knew he wasn't being realistic by hoping for such a thing. Odds were Bill was still MIA.

They climbed out of the car, arms filled with greasy brown bags from Lazy Susan's diner. They marched up the front porch stairs, deciding to fetch the twins' suitcases later, and knocked at the front door. It took a moment, but Stan eventually answered. He opened the door with an annoyed expression that immediately vanished as he beheld the faces of his family and friends. A grin quickly spread on his face.

"Kids! Soos! Melody!" he exclaimed.

"Grunkle Stan!" Mabel and Dipper returned and hugged the old man, staining his shirt with the grease dripping from their bags.

"I've got to admit I completely forgot you two were coming over today." He admitted with a chuckle, then he squeezed them tighter, "But I'm sure glad you're here."

The hug lasted much longer than either twin had been anticipating. It conveyed just how much Stan had missed them and, perhaps, how lonely he had been. Dipper felt his throat tighten at the thought. A part of him supposed he should ask how his great uncle was doing, but another part decided against it. He was afraid that if he asked, Grunkle Stan would cry or that maybe he would. The subject was still sensitive. Perhaps it was best to act as though nothing was horribly wrong. Like nothing â€" _no one_ â€" was missing.

"Anyways, come inside!" Grunkle Stan eventually said as he released Mabel and Dipper.

"We bought you some food, Mister Pines." Soos informed as he walked in.

"Oh, you shouldn't have." Stan said, entering the kitchen and gesturing the garbage bin. There was a greasy brown paper bag that could only have been from Greasy's, "I've already had my supper."

"That's weirdâ€|" Dipper muttered, glancing at his great uncle, "Lazy Susan said she hadn't seen you in a while."

"I saw her a half hour ago." Stan shrugged, "Maybe she's going senile or something. Or maybe she forgot. The diner was flooded when I got there."

"I'll put this in the fridge then." Soos declared, "You Pines might be incapable of cooking, but I'm pretty sure you can't screw up using the microwave."

"You'd be surprised." Stan snorted.

"Yeah, it's like a fifty, fifty thing." Mabel nodded.

"How do any of you survive?" Melody asked, amused.

"Junk food, mostly." Dipper answered.

They sat at the table and though Stan had already had his meal, he sat with them. They chatted idly. He caught up with Soos and Melody and then asked his nephew and niece about university. The two gave the same vague answer as they had before, preferring not to dwell on

it. Stan shrugged and simply told them that university wasn't for everyone and their parents would understand if they decided to drop out. The matter ended there.

They talked for hours, laughing and having fun for what felt like the first time in a very long time. However, the moment was over too soon for Dipper who couldn't help but think about Ford. Here they were, having fun, and Ford was absent. It felt unfair. How dare Dipper enjoy himself when he was responsible for spiriting away his great uncle? He chewed his lower lip and struggled to stop thinking about how he didn't deserve to be happy " not after what he allowed to happen.

"Oh hey, by the way, Grunkle Stan," Mabel asked, drawing Dipper out of his dark thoughts, "Have you heard anything from Bill?"

Stan's smile faltered for a short moment. "No. I have no idea where he is." He answered and Mabel's shoulders dropped in disappointment. "Don't worry, sweetie. I'm sure he'sâ€|coping."

"I wish he were here." She muttered. "I miss him."

"I'm sure he misses you too." Stan said, "He'll turn up sooner or later."

They resumed light conversation after that final remark. Soos and Melody left a few hours later, nearly forgetting to unload the twins' luggage from their car's trunk. They waved them goodbye from the porch before returning back into the Shack.

"Yeesh." Stan shuddered as he made his way towards the living room, "Summer's really over. The nights are getting so much colder."

"Winter's just around the corner." Dipper nodded.

"Not for you two though," Stan smirked, "California's as warm as ever, I bet."

"You'd be surprised." Mabel countered, "It can get pretty cold over there, more than you would think."

"I know, I'm teasing." Stan chuckled and then glanced at a clock, "Anyways, it's getting late. Better head off to bed. You know where the blankets are if you need any more."

"Yeah, you're right. Goodnight, Grunkle Stan." They said as they brought their things upstairs.

"Goodnight." He replied.

Stan stayed at the bottom of the stairs as he watched his nephew and niece make their way to their room in the attic. Dipper wondered why their great uncle wasn't heading off to bed as well. He reckoned he was probably going to pay Ford's empty grave a visit. Dipper wasn't sure he would be able to do the same over the course of the week. His guilt made him feel like he wasn't allowed.

Dipper woke up with a start in his bed in the Shack's attic. He breathed heavily and clutched at his chest as his heart throbbed wildly. He had had another nightmare regarding Ford. Fortunately, Bill hadn't been present that time. The teen waited a moment for his heart rate to calm down. Once it did, he fell back on his bed with a heavy sigh. It was so strange being back in Gravity Falls. He had only been gone two months, but it didn't feel like it. It was almost as though Dipper had been gone for both a day and a year. Everything was oh so familiar and impossibly different.

After a moment, the brunet glanced to the bed next to his, discovering it empty. Mabel had already left the room and a quick glance at the alarm clock on their bedside table indicated that he had slept in. It was already ten in the morning. Dipper thus pushed himself from his mattress and trudged towards the bathroom. He felt far more refreshed and awake after his shower. The teen wandered downstairs and happened upon his sister and great uncle seated at the kitchen table. Empty plates sat in front of them. They must have finished eating only a short moment ago.

"Good morning, sleepy head." Mabel teased.

"Did you at least sleep well?" Stan asked, briefly peering away from the newspaper he read.

"Yeah." Dipper lied. He made his way to the coffee machine and looked through the nearby cupboards for the grounded beans. He quickly found what he was looking for but noticed how Bill's tea collection had significantly decreased, "You've been drinking a lot."

"Hun?" Stan asked, looking from his newspaper again.

"The tea." Dipper pointed before closing the cupboard and turning towards the machine, "There's a lot less than before."

"Yeah, well," Stan sighed and stared forlornly towards the window, "That ass hole hasn't been back. He can't replenish his supply while he's doing God knows what."

"I wish he would at least give us news." Mabel mumbled.

"Me too." Stan admitted quietly.

Dipper felt the same way but didn't bother voicing it. It was strange to realise just how much Bill suddenly meant to the Pines family. A little over five years ago, the demon had tried to kill them all and enslave the world. Now he was a cherished friend — dare Dipper say it, he was practically he and Mabel's uncle. Had someone told him he would one day come to hold the blond as dearly as he did, he wouldn't have believed them. Regardless, Dipper turned back to his machine and watched as it spat out a dark brown liquid into his cup. The strong odor of coffee filled his nostrils and the caffeine was already filling him with energy.

"So," Mabel suddenly piped cheerfully, "We all ought to get away from the Shack for the day. Maybe we could go downtown? Or maybe we can go trekking through the woods?"

"That sounds like fun." Dipper smiled and took his mug.

"Eh, you kids go on ahead." Stan shrugged. Mabel's smile fell into a frown and Dipper couldn't help but feel disappointed. "I've got stuff to do today."

"Grunkle Stanâ€|" Mabel started pleadingly, "Come on. Soos and Melody told us you haven't left the Shack much. Fresh air and a change in scenery would do you some good."

"I appreciate the concern sweetie, but I'm busy." Stan said with a gentle smile, "I've got a few things to patch up. This old building's falling apart and I don't have a demon to magically fix all those problems."

"Do you need help?" Dipper offered.

"No, it's nothing I can't take care of on my own." Stan assured, "Besides, I've got Dan on speed dial and, let's be real, kid, you probably won't be able to lift the stuff I'll be lugging around anyways. You two should go out. I hear your friend Grenda's in town with that Austrian prince."

"Grenda's here!? Really!?" Mabel gasped excitedly. When Grenda had graduated from high school, she had decided to enroll in a European university. Naturally, she chose to go to the same school as her long-time boyfriend, Marius, in Vienna. Keeping in contact and skype conversations had become a bit of a challenge what with the time difference. "Oh my gosh! I can't believe I didn't know!"

"Are you sure you'll be fine?" Dipper insisted.

"Yeah, don't sweat it." Stan guaranteed, and when he saw that his nephew still seemed sceptical he added: "Look, we'll do something tomorrow as a family. I promise. But, today, I need to keep my house from literally falling apart."

"Alright." Dipper finally conceded, "Just call us if you need anything."

"Actually, could you call me before you come back home?" Stan asked, "I'll need you to fetch some groceries. I'd tell you to text me but I still haven't figured that out yet." Dipper couldn't help but snicker. "Hey! Don't laugh, you punk!"

"Sorry." He grinned, "We'll stop by the grocery shop and call you."

"Good." Stan smiled, "Have fun."

Dipper and Mabel left the kitchen and pulled on their shoes. Today was warmer than yesterday but a cold breeze compelled them to pull on sweaters. They shouted a "see you later" to Stan before leaving the Shack. Mabel pulled out her phone and immediately texted Grenda to meet up somewhere downtown. Dipper waited after her. They otherwise would have been heading towards the bus stop but Mabel's magic now rendered public transportation unnecessary. They would be able to take her magic bubble for a significant part of the way and not have to spend a dime.

"Alright," Mabel said and shoved her phone in her pocket, "Grenda and

Marius are going to meet us at that one cafÃ© on Main Street."

"Geez, that's specific." Dipper snorted sarcastically.

"You know which one I'm talking about!" She insisted, "It's the one cafÃ©! You know, with the sign and the foodâ€"

"Mabel, that's literally the description of _every_ cafÃ© ever." Dipper pointed out.

"Whatever, _I_ know where to go and that's all that matters." His sister concluded.

"Hey, Mabel," Dipper added quickly before she could create their mode of transportation with her magic. She effectively paused and looked at him expectantly, "Doâ€|did you get the impression Grunkle Stan was trying to get rid of us?"

"A littleâ€|" She admitted hesitantly, "Why?"

"I don't know." He sighed, "I just thought it was weird. Do you think he's hiding something from us?"

"No." Mabel shook her head sadly, "I think he's still grieving and maybe he just wasn't ready to re-enter the real world today. He didn't lose just anybody, brobro, he lost his twin."

"I guessâ€|"

She then raised her hands and conjured a bubble around the two of them. They slowly began ascending towards the sky and Dipper took a comfortable seat at the bottom. He beheld the beautiful view they had from the clouds with much awe. Gravity Falls was truly beautiful in the autumn. The brunet glanced between the trees to the roof tops of nearby buildings and houses. Then he looked at his hands and frowned. Dipper had been trying for over a year to unlock his magic but hadn't been able to do so. Lately, he hadn't been meditating much nor spending any amount of particular effort to unlocking his magical potential. He had been busy mourning his great uncle and, when he had enough composure to do other things, he tried working on university projects and readings.

"What are you thinking about?" Mabel asked.

"Hm?" Dipper returned absently.

"You've got your thinking face on." She indicated, "What are you thinking about?"

"Magic." Dipper admitted, "I'm wondering if I'll ever be able to unlock mine."

"Bill said it would take time because neither of us had the Gift." Mabel reminded.

"And yet you managed to do it within a month." Dipper countered. He sighed deeply and looked back at the top of the buildings, "I'm thinking that maybe I just won't be able to do it. Even if I did, what's the point? Bill's not around to show me the ropes."

"I'm still in the learning phase and Bill's not here for me either." Mabel remarked as she slowly began lowering her bubble into the cover of the trees on the edge of town. From there, it would be a ten minute walk to Main Street. "You don't see me giving up. I'm figuring out my magic on my own, Dipper."

"But you had a teacher to teach you the basics." Dipper challenged.

"You've got a big brain filled with information on the supernatural." Mabel retorted, "I don't. By all means, you'll have an easier time teaching yourself how to do things more than me." When they landed, she dissipated the bubble, "So don't give up, okay? Keep trying."

Dipper sighed as he stood. "Alright." He agreed.

The twins emerged from where they had landed and walked down the road. They weaved through the commercial roads at their leisure, looking attentively at the windows of small shops as they passed by. Most of the boutiques they crossed were meant for tourists with the typical knickknacks they would search for as mementoes of their journey. These same stores were generally closed as tourist season was mostly finished. Dipper looked away for a moment, glancing to the other side to see if there were more shops open. He tore his gaze almost immediately when it fell upon Maria Morgan's antique shop. He hadn't been back to the establishment ever since the Warlock crisis having taken lieu a little over a year ago.

Eventually, they happened upon the café Mabel had scheduled their meet with Grenda and Marius. It was an adorable French place that smelled divine and displayed a variety of appetising sweets. Dipper was salivating at the mere sight of them. He had never taken note of the petit restaurant before mostly because he didn't go to this given part of Gravity Falls much. It was a nice change of pace and a comfortable place in which to wait for Grenda and Marius to arrive. They ordered themselves pastries and took them back to one of small tables in the far back corner of the small area. Shortly after, the two they were waiting on finally arrived.

"Oh my gosh, Grenda!" Mabel squealed instantly and jumped out of her seat.

"Oh my gosh, Mabel!" She bellowed back in equal excitement.

The two girls ran to each other and met in a powerful, bone crushing hug. Marius trailed behind a bit meekly, unsure whether he ought to greet Dipper or not. Dipper went through a similar debate in his mind but ultimately opted to push aside the initial awkwardness between them to make friends. He hadn't admittedly seen much of the Austrian before because the latter spent most of his time frolicking with Grenda when he was still around. Then he went back to Europe and, obviously, there wasn't much to be done at that point to get to know him.

"Hey." Dipper greeted simply as he walked over.

"Hello." Marius replied with a kind smile and thick German accent. "You are Mabel's brother; 'Dipping', ja?"

"Dipper." He corrected with a chuckle, which made Marius blush in embarrassment.

"I am sorry, I have lost little English." Marius explained, nervously fiddling with the hem of his shirt, "We only speak German back home and meine liebe learns very quickly."

"It's alright," Dipper assured, "Your English is still really good."

"Thank you, Dipper." The Austrian smiled brightly. "You are much kind."

"Boys!" Grenda interrupted sharply, "Let's sit down! My legs are killing me!"

"You can talk about sports or whatever at the table!" Mabel chimed jokingly.

Marius sunk his head and nodded shyly as he obeyed the command. Dipper found his shyness amusing and wondered just how much Grenda exploited it for her own person pleasure. He sat next to his girlfriend whereas Dipper resumed his spot next to his sister. As the girls chatted, Marius left at some point to purchase a few pastries for he and Grenda and they ate together. Naturally, Grenda did most of the talking. She related how great it was to be living in a luxurious apartment with Marius in the heart of Vienna and how fun University was if a bit challenging given the language. Though she had managed to learn German rather quickly, having a sort of a knack for languages, she had to relearn most of the terms utilised in her classes because she had only ever had them taught to her in English beforehand.

"That sounds like an amazing experience." Mabel elated, leaning her head against her head as she sighed, "I wish I had a European boyfriend!"

"You two should totally come visit!" Grenda exclaimed excitedly, "I know you're living on your own as well now but it would be super cheap because you could just take one of Marius' planes, right sweetie?"

"Ja." He confirmed happily.

"Marius also gives a killer tour of the city!" She continued, "We could go shopping and the food over there is amazing! They have this thing; it's a sausage stuffed with cheese and wrapped in bacon! It's so good!"

"Oh, now I'm getting all excited!" Mabel squealed and hopped enthusiastically in her seat. "This needs to happen!"

"Obviously, Dipper," Grenda added, turning to him, "I get shopping is a thing we like to do and that you're not fond of, but I know you love history and Vienna's full of it! Now it's not the crazy fantasy stuff you typically like, but I'm sure you can get behind it. I'm not the biggest history fan and even I enjoyed that part of the tour Marius first gave me when I got there!"

"Yes, Vienna has rich history." Marius nodded with a bashful smile, "A lot of people find interest in more recent history, however. They want to see what is left from World War II."

Dipper's interest was effectively picked, "World War II?"

Marius nodded, "A lot of people forget Austria was a member of Axis Powers." He explained, "And that Adolf Hitler was born Austrian. It is taboo but a lot of people like seeing the places he lived and visited when he was alive."

"They have this opera house," Grenda expounded, "It's super gorgeous and Marius takes me there like, once a month, but it was completely destroyed when the Allies bombed the city. They rebuilt it, obviously, but the whole city is just littered with little facts like that." She then seemed to remember something which excited her and slapped Marius's arm as she gasped; "Oh! Tell them about the pastry shop!"

He didn't seem bothered by the heavy hit to his arm, "Ah yes," he said, "There is a pastry shop downtown that Franz Ferdinand loved to visit. It was his favourite."

"Franz Ferdinand?" Dipper muttered to himself when the name suddenly clicked, "Wait, you mean Archduke Franz Ferdinand? The guy who's assassination instigated World War I?"

Marius confirmed it with a nod.

"And let me tell ya," Grenda grinned, "Franky-boy had a fantastic palate because the pastries you can buy there are absolutely delicious!"

"Grenda," Mabel stated seriously, "The more you tell us these things, the more I just want to hop on a plane and fly to Vienna right now. It sounds so magical!"

The group spent a lot more time chatting about Vienna and the things to do in said city for a good long while. It was interesting to hear about and when Marius began delving into the medieval history and lore of the city, Dipper got all the more interested. By the time they switched the conversation to talk about their own university experience, the teen was as ready as his sister to jump on a plane and fly away instantly. The urge to discover a new, amazing place motivated the desire as much as that of wanting to forget the grief he felt.

Eventually, the four of them were kicked out by the owner who wasn't too fond of loiterers. She had given them the ultimatum of purchasing more food or leaving and they chose the latter. Thus they walked around the streets of Gravity Falls. Mabel and Grenda walked a few paces ahead, eagerly running around and talking about memories of a bygone time whenever they saw something that sparked a story of the past. Dipper and Marius trailed behind making idle conversation. He learned more about the Austrian man who steadily revealed himself to have a personality very similar to Grenda's. Dipper reckoned he was probably just shy and reserved around those he didn't know well, though that was progressively changing.

Before they knew it, the sun was falling behind the tree line,

illuminating the sky with bright orange and pink rays. It was quite beautiful but it was also a sign to part ways. The twins still had to stop at the grocery shop and fetch food for Grunkle Stan. Mabel and Grenda promised each other to hang out, at the very least, one last time before she had to leave with Marius. With a wave, Dipper and Mabel watched as the other two left in direction to Grenda's parents' house hand in hand. Then they turned their heels and headed towards the nearest grocery shop.

"Man, I really missed Grenda." Mabel sighed as they rounded the block's corner, coming upon a Walmart. "But now I really miss Candy. We should really hang out again. Maybe she could come with us to Vienna."

"That sounds like fun." Dipper agreed absently.

"You could bring Robbie." Mabel added unexpectedly; so much so Dipper choked on his own saliva.

"W-why would I do thatâ€|?" He asked.

"I mean, I know it's complicated between you guys," Mabel conceded as they walked into the establishment, "But you two are a _something_, right?"

"I don't know if going on trips to Europe is something _somethings_ do." Dipper mumbled and fished out his phone, "Besides, I haven't really spoken to him in a while. We kind of just text a few times a week. Sometimes less."

"Maybe a trip to Vienna is what you two need to rekindle and get that fire burning again." Mabel grinned and jabbed him playfully with her elbow.

"I'm going to ignore you now." Dipper declared.

He dialed the Shack's house number and waited for Stan to pick up. He took a lot more time than Dipper expected, narrowly picking up before the message recorder kicked in. The old man seemed a bit out of breath and distracted.

"Hello?" He said.

"We're in a Walmart." Dipper stated as they wandered to the food section. "Lots of sales on things. What do you want us to pick up?"

"Ohâ€|uhâ€|" Stan muttered pensively, "Cereal â€" but get the kind you and your sister like â€" some milk, dried snacks and that's it."

"Dried snacks is kind of vague." The brunet remarked. "Do you want a specific kind or is it up to me and Mabel?"

"Whaâ€"no! I'm on the phone!" Stan snapped, unaware he was yelling into said device.

"Grunkle Stan?"

"Yeah, sorry kiddo." Stan said quickly, "You and your sister decide."

I'll eat whatever you two eat, so I don't care."

"Who are you with?" Dipper queried.

"Dan." He answered with a sigh, "I'm going to have to let you go, he's literally going to break something if I don'tâ€"

"That's fine." Dipper shrugged and winced when he heard a loud bang, "We'll be back in fifteen minutes, give or take."

"Oh, waitâ€!" Stan added just before Dipper was about to hang up. "Could you, uh, buy some tea? It's the Twinings blackcurrant one."

What an unexpected turn of events. Then again, what else was there to expect? It was only natural for Stan to develop a love for tea when Bill had flooded their cupboards with a wide variety of blends. Who else was going to drink all of it?

"You really got hooked, hun?" Dipper snickered.

"I guess I did." Stan chuckled, "I ran out of that one fairly quickly. It was my favourite."

"Anything else?" Dipper asked.

"No, that's it." Stan assured. "We'll decide what we do for supper when you get back home. See you in fifteen."

Dipper finally hung up and shoved his cell back in his pocket. Mabel looked at him expectantly until he resumed his conversation. They then went ahead and fetched the requested items, adding a few other things they personally wanted to their load. The twins subsequently hauled their bags outside and into the nearest thicket where Mabel could cast her bubble spell without being seen. They ascended into the darkening sky and were back at the Shack in ten minutes.

4. It's Hard Letting Go

The lights in the Shack illuminated the area and the twins walked the last few meters to the front door. Before entering, Dipper glanced back and saw that Manly Dan's truck was absent. He shrugged and assumed he had just left. Grunkle Stan wasn't much for company these days and if he didn't want to spend too much time with Soos and Melody, he could only imagine the feeling extended to the other man as well. Hopefully, they could break said behaviour.

"We're back!" Mabel called cheerily from the entrance as she kicked off her shoes.

Stan emerged from the kitchen, arms akimbo. "Took you two long enough." He smirked, "So I know we said we'd talk about what we would eat at home, but, let's be honest, we were going to go to Greasy's. I got you two your usual. Hurry up, it's still warm."

"Awesome!" Mabel grinned.

Dipper dallied at the door and sceptically glanced outside. He looked at the parking lot through the window next to the door and thought

back on the conversation he had had with his great uncle over the phone. Stan had said he might call Manly Dan over if he needed help and the way he was acting with everyone aside he and Mabel could explain why his friend hadn't stayed any longer; however, Dipper couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Stan and Wendy's dad had a dynamic friendship but, over the phone, he sounded annoyed when he was yelling at him. Why? What were they even fixing? Sure the Shack was a mess but it had always been one and nothing seemed so different nor hazardous to necessitate the trouble of renovations. And wasn't Manly Dan a handyman among many other things?

"Did you have fun with your friends?" Stan asked from the kitchen, snapping Dipper from his thoughts.

The teen shook his head and left for the kitchen. There was only one way to find the answers.

"Yeah, it was great." Mabel answered enthusiastically as she took her food out of its greasy bag, "Grenda and Marius invited us to come visit them in Vienna."

"Isn't that expensive?" Stan mentioned, placing his burger on a small plate.

"If we had to buy our own plane tickets and book a hotel, probably." Mabel conceded, "Luckily, Marius is super rich and doesn't mind housing us. The most we would have to do is pay for the stuff we buy."

"Hun, well, speaking of money," Stan added, "Remind me to give you kids a few thousand dollars before you leave. Neither of you have jobs at the moment, right?"

"Oh, that's so nice of you, Grunkle Stan," Mabel hurriedly said, "But you really don't have to. Dipper and I are doing fine!"

"Of course you are." Stan boasted, like he expected no less from his nephew and niece, "Use the money to treat yourselves. Or invest it. I don't care. You're getting it whether you like it or not and I won't be changing my mind."

Mabel looked like she wanted to argue but she shut her mouth instead. She must have concluded, like Dipper had, that there was no point in disputing the decision. Stan wasn't going to change his mind no matter what they said.

"You going to sit down or stand there all night, Dipper?" Stan chuckled and took a big bite of his grease dripping burger. It looked utterly disgusting but the teen knew it tasted like heaven as much as it did like diabetes.

Dipper hadn't realised he had been standing in the entryway for the duration of their brief conversation. He jolted slightly when the attention shifted to him though it did get him to move from his position. He sat down next to Mabel and pulled out his own greasy heart attack between buns from its paper bag prison.

"Hey, Grunkle Stan," he started slowly as he peeled the top bun off to add more ketchup, "I was wondering; what were you and Manly Dan

fixing?"

"Lots of things." Stan shrugged and thought back on what he had done before answering, "I took care of most of the roof tiles. Been having too many leaks whenever it rained, you know? Then I needed to replace boards at the back of the house so I called Dan over to help move the wood around."

"But you were indoors when I called." Dipper mentioned. He hadn't heard the static from the wind but rather the clinging of household items. Mabel frowned at him but did nothing more.

"Yeah, we had to fetch things from the basement." Stan replied, suddenly aware that Dipper was looking for something with his set of questions. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Dipper assured, "I justâ€|nothing _seemed_ broken, so I was just curious."

It was rather obvious that Stan knew Dipper's brief dismissal was a lie. The latter was thankful all the same when he simply decided to believe what he had said and leave it at that.

"It's a good thing _I've_ got a sharp eye then." Stan smirked and took another bite from his burger, "Otherwise this house would have crumbled to the ground by now."

Dipper gave a half-hearted chuckle to the joke. He turned to his food and allowed the conversation to change direction entirely. Mabel asked Stan about what he had been up to since they left. He answered honestly, conveying he rarely ever left the Shack and spent most of his time doing nothing if he wasn't taking care of the shop. Mabel chastised his isolation and lectured him about leaving the house. She argued that fresh air was good for the mind and to relax. Though Stan seemed slightly annoyed by her nagging, Dipper noticed that he seemed touched by her concern â€" or so the light smile on his lips indicated.

When they finished eating, it was rather late. Having worked all day, Stan retired to his room earlier than he normally would to sleep. He wished his niece and nephew a good night before disappearing. The twins, on the other hand, weren't ready to sleep yet. However, they still returned to the attic. They didn't want to risk keeping their great uncle up with noise made by moving about on the main floor or by watching TV. Dipper expected them to remain in their own little corners until it got late enough to sleep, but the moment he entered the room, Mabel shut the door.

"What was that about?" She asked with a frown. "You were questioning Grunkle Stan like he had done something wrong."

"I don't knowâ€|Didn't _you_ think he was a bit weird?" Dipper asked; "Ever since we got to Gravity Falls, Grunkle Stan has been offâ€|"

"What were you expecting?" Mabel sighed, frustrated, "He _lost_ his brother, Bill's MIA, and he's been alone for three months. Of course he's a bit odd at the moment, he's been grieving _alone_."

"That's not what I mean." Dipper said as he shook his head, "The way

he's been actingâ€¦it's like the way he was the first summer we spent here five years ago â€” it's like he's hiding something."

"Dipperâ€¦" Mabel warned, "You need to stop this before it gets out of hand."

"Well, you noticed some of the inconsistencies, right?" Dipper insisted, "I mean, why would Lazy Susan tell us she hasn't seen Grunkle Stan in a while? She's been swamped many times before but she still remembers her regulars and those who live in this town. I don't buy that she was too busy to notice nor remember him. I also don't buy that he spent the whole day fixing the house either."

Mabel sighed deeply. She took a minute before responding and crossed her arms over her chest. "Why's that?" she asked, her tone indicating her discouragement.

"For starters, the house looks the exact same as it did this morning." Dipper started, "Then there's the fact Manly Dan's truck wasn't there."

"Because Grunkle Stan probably shooed him away when they finished." Mabel countered.

"But it didn't even look like there was an extra car in the parking lot." He maintained, "The way he also yelled over the phone is telling. I get he has an energetic relationship with Manly Dan, but his toneâ€¦I don't believe Stan would have ever yelled at him like that â€” like he was genuinely annoyed."

"Then who do you think he was talking to?" Mabel sighed hopelessly, "Bill?"

The thought had crossed Dipper's mind before. It was how he justified Lazy Susan telling them she hadn't seen Stan in a while despite the latter having supposedly purchased food from her days ago. It could also justify the drop in tea supplies as well as the last second request to buy more of a specific brand.

"I-I don't knowâ€¦ maybeâ€¦" He stammered.

"Do you hear yourself?" Mabel frowned. Her tone wasn't punitive as much as it was wounded, "It's like you're dismissing the most obvious answers to your questions because you want a different answer. That's not what's happening. Bill's not here." She sighed deeply, "Grief changes people. Grunkle Stan has spent the better part of the three past months alone with no one to talk to or care for him â€” not that those around him didn't try. He isolated himself to deal with the death of his brother, his twin. Of course he's different now, why wouldn't he be?"

Was that what he had been doing? Had he been deliberately looking for even the flimsiest of signs that Grunkle Stan was up to something? That Bill had returned?

"I don't know what you were hoping to find with this train of thought," she continued softly, "but you need to stop before you get too into it. You'll end up hurting yourself and you'll hurt Grunkle Stan. There's no mystery this time. There's nothing to

solve."

Mabel's words struck at Dipper's core. He felt his throat tighten with emotion and tears sting at his eyes. Perhaps it made sense. He had been plagued with a series of nightmares and intense guilt ever since Ford had died. Maybe he had subconsciously been looking for clues to a mystery that would ultimately conclude itself with Bill's return and Ford's revival.

"It's hard, letting go." Mabel said after a moment, "But we've got to accept the facts. The Grim Reaper told us there was no way to retrieve Grunkle Ford's soul from the Void. You spent most of the rest of the summer looking for a way to do so anyways and found nothing. Instead, you confirmed what it told us. He's gone and he's not coming back. Not this time, despite how much we want him to."

Finally, Dipper let his grief out. He gave into the sadness that had been choking him and allowed the tears to flow freely. He stumbled back onto his bed and sat on the mattress as he buried his face in his hands and cried and cried and cried. The bed dipped a little when Mabel took a seat next to him and slid an arm around his shoulder to pull him into a hug. He felt her tears wet his own shirt.

"We've got to let this all goâ€¦" She muttered beneath her sobs, "We've got to stop hoping for a miracle that won't happenâ€¦"

"I'm sorryâ€¦" Dipper hiccupped.

"It's okay." Mabel assured and forced a tight smile, "It's okay, I understand."

They cried together for what felt like an hour. By then, they began to calm down and were significantly tired out by their emotions. Regardless, they sat leaning against one another in total silence for a long while before doing much of anything. Dealing with the death of a loved one, an idol, was difficult and Dipper was beginning to think the pain he felt in his heart would never leave and neither would the guilt. He couldn't help but allow his mind to wander to the reality of their situation; had he been better, had he been more convincing, had he suggested a better plan to deal with the Grim Reaper, had he done just about anything more, Ford would probably be with them right now.

If Ford was dead and Bill was absent and grieving God knows where, it was all Dipper's fault.

"We'll be okay." Mabel murmured quietly.

"Yeah." Dipper agreed though he wasn't so sure.

"We've just got to take it one day at a time." She said, "Things will get better."

5. Faraway From All the Troubles

Tomorrow was a new day.

Dipper didn't wake up quite as late as he had the previous day,

however he was still the last to find himself in the kitchen. Mabel and Grunkle Stan were eating toast and quietly minding their own business, still not awake enough to engage in conversation. The older man was mindlessly reading the cartoons in the newspaper as he sipped at his coffee whereas the brunette munched absently at her toast while browsing the internet on her cell phone. Dipper joined them at the table after making himself a cup of coffee and grabbing a cereal box. He was too lazy to make himself a proper bowl.

"Well, now that we're all here," Mabel began, putting her phone down, "What are we doing today?"

"I've got to finish the roof tiles." Stan sighed and groaned at the thought, "Seeing as I did a lot of it yesterday, it shouldn't take me as long."

Dipper sat up straight and glanced at his sister. "But you'll still have time to do something with us, right?" She asked, "Outside of the Shack? Like you promised?"

Grunkle Stan's eyes fell wide open as he remembered the promise he had effectively made the day before. Suddenly, he seemed uncomfortable and Dipper knew he was trying to think of a way to go back on his word. Mabel would be disappointed. "I'm sorry sweetie, but I'm too busy to go out." He said regretfully, "I think I'll be free tomorrow, though."

"And then tomorrow you'll tell me you're still too busy." Mabel called out instantly. Dipper was taken aback. He hadn't expected that level of bluntness. "Come on, Grunkle Stan. We're only here for so long. The week's going to be over before we know it and by then we won't have spent time together."

"I know and I'm sorry, but this isn't something I can just push back." Stan explained, averting his gaze shamefully, "This house could literally fall to bits and pieces if I don't take care of it."

"Then let us help." Mabel demanded.

"I can't make you work on your break week." Stan said, "As much as I appreciate the offered help, it just wouldn't feel right."

Dipper frowned. He couldn't help but start feeling suspicious again. However, he shook his head and forced the thoughts aside. There was no mystery this time. The way Stan was acting was a product of his grief; that much was obvious. He wasn't hiding anything. Not this time.

"Why not?" She challenged. For someone who had chastised Dipper the day before in regards to potentially hurting Stan, Mabel was going at him hard. "You're old, no offence. We could help you seeing as we're younger and stronger than you would think. I can wield magic and lift stuff without breaking a sweat. Plus we could help you finish your task faster so you could do something else with your day."

Mabel's cogent arguments backed Stan into a corner. Dipper could see the older man struggling to find a good counter to refute what had been said but could come up with nothing. He sighed in defeat, "Fine." He conceded, "You make a compelling case, you should think

about becoming a lawyer or something."

She beamed, "So you'll let us help you out?"

"No," Stan replied, "I meant what I said, I would feel bad making you help me out during your break week. We'll do some random activity instead. What did you have in mind?"

Dipper wasn't sure what he expected out of his sister. However, when she began listing all the activities they could do and the people they could invite, he was admittedly disappointed. Without having realised it, he had further indulged the theory that Stan was yet again hiding something from them. How couldn't he help but think so after he insisted so much on being left alone for another day, especially after he had promised he would spend time with them? Dipper was sure that had Mabel not made such a strong case against him, Stan would have found a way to stay home and shoo them away again.

"You sure you don't want help around the house?" Dipper abruptly asked, interrupting his sister's excited chatter. When Stan got uncomfortable and Mabel began to get upset, he hastily added: "I-I'm only asking because it really wouldn't be a problem. It's like Mabel said, you're getting on in ages and I wouldn't want you getting hurt moving heavy stuff around. If we can help, neither of us mind. Honest."

That last part was true despite its primary purpose of normalising his initial question. If Stan really was up to something, he didn't want him to be already aware that Dipper was onto him. If he could maintain the element of surprise, he would for as long as he could.

"Okay, I'm not getting _that_ old." Stan objected, slightly offended.

"Wellâ€¦" Mabel trailed off in an unspoken agreement.

"University has made you kids rude." Stan grumbled. "I'll be _fine_. I've got Dan on speed dial if I really do need help."

"Maybe you could also ask Soos for help too?" Dipper added, remembering the worry the man expressed upon their arrival.

"Soos has a life." Stan shrugged, "He doesn't need to be bothered with this stuff."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind helping in his free time." Dipper insisted, "At least give him a call to see if he's available before deciding anything."

"Gah, you kidsâ€¦" Stan sighed in exasperation.

"We're just worried about you." Mabel defended softly.

"Look, I'm fine." The old man claimed, "I know you're all here for me â€" if those weekly calls aren't proof of that then I don't know what is. Your concern is really flattering, but I just need space from time to time."

"We get that; you justâ€¦" Mabel paused and bit her lower lip, "You don't have to deal with this aloneâ€¦you don't have to carry the weight of everything. We just wanted you to know that."

Stan smirked slightly, "I almost have the feeling that's something you want to say to Bill more than me." He commented.

Mabel looked away and said nothing. Silence washed over them. The conversation had taken an unexpectedly tense turn and now no one really knew what to say. Stan was the one who took the initiative all the same to re-engage in pleasantries.

"Well," He started, pushing himself from his chair, "Are we just going to sit here all day or are we going to do something?"

The activity they settled on was a trek through the Gravity Falls woods. Despite it being autumn, today was a strangely warm day and they would have been crazy not to take advantage of the weather to enjoy the beautiful array of warm colours painting the forest. Stan knew of a pathway that would take them to the top of the twin mountains through which an alien saucer had crash while attempting to land many millennia ago. From there they would have a gorgeous view of the town bathed in the colours of fall.

They thus pulled on adequate clothes and shoes for a hike through the wilderness and Mabel prepared them sandwiches and snacks to eat if they ever got peckish on their journey. Then, at the last minute, the twins reckoned Soos and Melody might be interested in joining them as they had expressed wanting to be more active and present in Stan's life. Dipper thus called them and Mabel decided to ring Grenda and Marius. The two would be leaving soon and she thought it would be nice for Marius to experience the true beauty of a North American forest. From what little she knew, Europe had little to no forests and what ones they did have couldn't fathom to rival those in the United States or Canada in terms of size and grandiosity.

Afterwards, they hopped into the stanmobile and headed to the trail in question. The Pines were the first to arrive though they didn't have to wait particularly long for the others to get there. Soos and Melody were evidently overjoyed with having been included in the outing. It was also very apparent that the handyman had missed Stan on a personal level. He chatted avidly with the older man, telling him about everything he had missed out on during his three months of isolation. Stan struggled to keep up with his excited babbling and, eventually, Melody had to step in to tell him to calm down a bit.

Last to arrive were Grenda and Marius and once they finally hopped out of Grenda's mother's car, they began their walk. Mabel sauntered ahead of the group with Grenda and Marius whereas Dipper trailed behind with the other adults, that being said he wasn't a part of their small group either. He remained a few steps behind them and occasionally listened to whatever they talked about, though most of the time he was just looking at the forest surrounding them. Most of the tree and plants had bright yellow leaves that appeared to be golden when hit by the sun light. Similarly, the rare trees with red leaves resembled shimmering rubies. It was enchanting and Dipper's heart skipped a beat at the sheer splendour of it. He adored everything all the more when he remembered how the forest was

populated with various sprites and fey.

However, his moment of wonder was interrupted by his phone buzzing. He jolted in surprise and fished it out of his pocket.

"Hey. Are you in Gravity Falls?" Read the text from Robbie.

"Yeah, how did you know?" Dipper replied.

"My mom thought she saw you and your sister at Walmart the other day." He answered and quickly added: "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. We're out trekking." Dipper wrote back. He was kind of amazed he still got reception though he supposed they weren't considerably far from Gravity Falls and, consequently, a reception tower.

"Must be pretty at this time of the year." Robbie commented.

Dipper smiled, "It is." He confirmed. For a moment, he almost sent him the message: "I wish you were here with me" but ultimately redacted it. He still didn't know where he stood with Robbie and, for all he knew, the other man could have begun pursuing a different person. If that was the case, he didn't want to make things needlessly complicated by expressing an emotion he wasn't sure he would be able to commit to in the long run.

"Dipper!" Mabel yelled from far away. When the brunet looked up in her direction, he noticed he was lagging significantly behind the group. "What are you doing?"

"Coming!" He assured as he shoved his phone back in his pocket and ran to catch up.

They zig zagged through the forest for hours, chatting and laughing. The walk had been so enjoyable that it had taken a long time before anyone began to get tired. They stopped in a small clearing once noon hit to have some sandwiches and whatever else the others had packed for themselves. Dipper really enjoyed watching everyone have fun despite his minimal participation. He didn't need to be at the center of the conversations to feel happy and at ease. Nonetheless, he wasn't quite as nonchalant as he would have liked.

Out of everyone, Dipper watched Grunkle Stan the most. The primary reason the latter was subject to most of his attention was to make sure he wasn't pushing himself and to make sure he wasn't being left out. He wanted to make sure his great uncle was having as much fun as everyone because the whole purpose of this outing was to change his frame of mind. And yet, Dipper couldn't help but notice things that he did that stroke him as odd. Stan kept glancing at the watch on his wrist almost obsessively and would often zone out of conversations like he wasn't particularly interested. He also seemed a bit jittery, as though something else was on his mind or he would rather be doing something different. The latter possibility seemed the more probable to Dipper if the way he constantly glanced back down the path was any indication.

Dipper suddenly stopped himself and shook his head. He needed to stop. He was overanalysing what was going on and providing unlikely explanations to his great uncle's actions. If the man kept zoning

out, it was probably because he was still thinking about his late brother, like Mabel had said. If he kept glancing at his watch and looking back at from where they came, it probably was because he wanted to get back to the Shack but to spend some time alone rather than doing something Dipper wished he would be doing. There were logical and normal explanations to Stan's behaviour. Despite how Gravity Falls was a hub for the paranormal, not everything was a conspiracy.

There was no mystery.

Not this time.

And yet, when they continued the final stretch of their trek, Dipper could have sworn he saw certain objects begin to hover a significant distance from the ground. However, when he did a double take, the objects in question were where they ought to be. Though he was aware that he was in a magical forest, Dipper couldn't help but start conjuring theories that would merit Mabel's scolding. He could almost hear her disapproving and rational counter arguments. If Stan was hiding Bill and the two were working on a way to bring Ford back to life, why wouldn't they tell them?

6. Where the Dust Comes Back to Life

Dipper hadn't woken up quite as late as all the previous days. He opened his eyes just as his sister left for the shower with a fresh pair of clothes. When she finished, he took her spot, which helped him wake up. She waited for him to finish before going downstairs. As such, Dipper was made witness to another argument between Mabel and Stan at a far too early hour of the morning. She had asked him to spend time with them again but Stan had refused once more; claiming he had spent the day before fooling around but now he needed to get back to work. Dipper wasn't quite sure what sort of answer his sister had expected.

"Look, your friends Grenda and Marius are leaving tomorrow," Stan reminded in the heat of their dispute, "Shouldn't you spend time with them while you've still got the chance? I'll be there tomorrow, but they won't be."

Unlike yesterday, Mabel found herself stumped. She looked like she wanted to find a counter but couldn't think of one. It was obvious she wanted to spend as much time as possible with her friend, especially now that the latter had moved to Austria, but she equally wanted to spend time with her great uncle. Her conundrum had her hesitating. "Do you promise we'll do something tomorrow?" she asked, emphasising on the last word.

"You betcha." Stan assured with a wink, "I'll probably be done everything I have to do around the house too so you'll have me all to yourself."

"Pinky promise." Mabel demanded, sticking out her pinky.

Stan smirked but complied. He hooked their pinkies together and gave a little shake before letting go. Mabel seemed satisfied.

"I assume you'll be tagging along with them?" Stan asked, turning to

Dipper.

"I guessâ€|" Dipper shrugged. He hadn't really planned to but he supposed giving Marius company and someone to talk to would please him. Grenda had a tendency to forget about him every now and again whenever she and Mabel got really caught up in their conversations.

"Then pick up something from Greasy's on your way back." Stan requested.

"Sure." Dipper agreed, "I'll grab you your usual?"

"No." Stan said which surprised him. The brunet had only asked as a sort of curtesy. His question had been more along the lines of rhetorical. "I'm not feeling a big ol' burger today."

"What'll you get instead?" Dipper asked, confused.

"I don't know." The old man mused after a moment, "Tell you what, give me a call when you're at Greasy's."

A call.

"I'll decide then." Stan concluded, "Might get the day's special, who knows?"

"Okayâ€|" Dipper agreed meekly.

Stan had asked them to call him at the grocery store two days ago when he had spent the day alone. It had seemed like he was shooing them away at the time but the latter request had seemed legitimate to Dipper who had noticed the dwindling food supply. Now that the same request was being made but in a different situation, the teen couldn't help but interpret the request as a sort of heads up â€" like if they called he could hide whatever he was doing and play the innocent. However, Dipper quickly mentally slapped himself and pushed the thoughts out of his head again. There he was suspecting his great uncle once more. He needed to stop. At least he had the sense to keep his paranoid thoughts to himself this time.

The twins finished breakfast and though Dipper was ready to go, Mabel had to fetch something from their room. When she started taking a long time, her brother began wandering around the house patiently. He paused upon passing in front of the door leading to the store. He thought about the vending machine and the thoughts he had been trying to suppress emerged. If Stan really was hiding something from them, he would keep his activities somewhere where he would have total privacy; Ford's hidden lab. The brunet glanced up at the stairs and waited to hear the sounds of Mabel's steps returning. After a brief moment of nothing, Dipper decide to push through the door.

The Mystery Shack store was closed. Tourist season was over and no one really came to Gravity Falls when winter was just around the corner. There were no clear skiing trails on any of the nearby mountains nor any quality resorts that could attract the more sporty tourists. Thus there was no point in keeping the shop open as Stan would lose more money than he would make. He looked at the counter expecting to find Wendy with her feet kicked up as she read a magazine or played on her phone but found it empty. It was strange

seeing the place so dark and lifeless.

Well, mostly darkâ€| Dipper thought and glanced at the vending machine.

The feeble light in the room came only from the vending machine which was still plugged in the wall. Dipper wandered to it and stared at it for a moment. Nearly all of the treats inside were expired and Stan had tinkered with the machine to increase the prices to something ludicrous. Naturally, this dissuaded most people from purchasing anything unless they were absolutely desperate for a snack or a beverage, but Dipper knew that it was voluntary. After all, they couldn't risk a random customer accidentally punching in the secret code, now could they?

Dipper eyes wandered to the small key pad on which to enter the code. He remembered it perfectly but hesitated entering it. What if Stan wasn't hiding anything? Then he would feel utterly stupid and wouldn't know how to go about apologizing to the man for having been so suspicious and paranoid. He supposed he would also have to apologize to Mabel and tell her she had been right all along. Thankfully, his sister wasn't the type to be smug about things like these. And yetâ€|

What if Stan _was_ hiding something?

Enough. Dipper told himself and sighed deeply, _There's only one way to figure this out. I'll deal with the answer after I get it._

If the code still worked, it meant Stan wasn't hiding anything. If the code didn't work, it meant Dipper either didn't enter it properly or that the former changed it. If it was the latter case, then it meant Stan was hiding something. With another deep breath, Dipper wiggled his shoulders and fingers gingerly. Then, without further ado, he punched in the code and waited.

And waited.

But nothing.

Dipper looked around nervously. His heart began beating faster and he punched the code in another time. And waited again. But, once more, nothing. It was possible that he had messed up the code twice in a row â€" despite knowing all of his passwords by heart, sometimes he screwed up the first few tries before finally getting it right. He decided that he would try again a third time and if it didn't work, he would accept what it meant. This time, he pressed in the dials very carefully and slowly to make sure they actually registered.

But, still, nothing happened.

Thoughts hastily began filling the teen's mind all at once to the point of it being overwhelming. He was right; Stan was hiding something. Why else would the code be different? He knew it. He had known it from the moment they arrived; when Stan inexplicably had a bag of Greasy's despite Lazy Susan having claimed she hadn't seen him in a while. It also explained why he always seemed to be shooing them away the moment he got the opportunity. Heck, it explained his

distant behaviour during their outing the previous day. Stan's silence wasn't just because he was grieving, he was hiding something and Dipper would find out what.

He thought back on any more inconsistencies. As he had established previously, the first one he noted was the bag of Greasy's and Lazy Susan's statement that she hadn't seen his great uncle in a while. The next one was the missing tea. Though he believed Stan would have definitely begun consuming the tea Bill left behind; for such a big amount of the impressive collection to be missing over the span of three months was suspicious. Stan wasn't a huge fan of tea and wouldn't have drank it as frequently as he would have needed to, to reduce the overall quantity. Then there was Manly Dan and the supposed house reparations. Not only did the house look no different from when they had first left that morning but it didn't even look like a truck had occupied the parking lot for a significant portion of the day. The way Stan had also supposedly spoken to Manly Dan during their conversation over the phone reinforced his doubt. Finally, the way Stan always seemed to be trying to get rid of them and asking for a heads up as to when they would be about to return added to everything.

There was also their hike in the forest and way Dipper thought he saw things begin to rise from the ground to consider, but he wasn't quite sure what it was he saw nor that it could be directly attributed to his great uncle. With everything now taken into consideration and listed, Dipper thought back on what it could all mean. The old man was definitely working on something he wanted to keep secret. Perhaps the fact that he was also working in Ford's lab meant that he required some of the tools found down there? However, the assumption that he was working on something didn't explain most of the inconsistencies Dipper noted.

But Bill doesâ€¦ Dipper thought.

Bill could have easily teleported to and from Greasy's to grab Stan some food. The demon would have also definitely consumed all of that tea seeing as it had quickly become his obsession shortly after it had first been introduced to him. If Bill was there, it would also explain Stan's tone over the phone. He maintained that his great uncle would never speak to Manly Dan in such a way, however he did believe he would address Bill in such a manner mostly because he had already done it before ample times. And yet, what Dipper struggled with was that, if Stan truly was hiding Bill in the basement, why hadn't he told them? What could they be working on that would necessitate such a level of secrecy?

"Dipper!" The brunet flinched and turned towards his sister. She stood in the door way, arms akimbo. "What are you doing? I've been ready for a while! Let's go!"

Dipper glanced at the vending machine. He couldn't go now. He needed to get into Ford's lab and find out what the hell was going on. But how was he going to do that? He looked around the room when an idea struck him. He ran to the windows and began pulling the curtains up but only a tad to allow for a small gap through which he could peer.

"What are you doing?" Mabel frowned and closed the shop door as she walked in.

"Something's up, Mabel." Dipper said as he ran to the other side of the room and began fixing the curtains there. If only one curtain was raised, it would be suspicious.

"Not this again." Mabel groaned and tilted her head up in exasperation. "Dipperâ€"

"No, I know it for a fact now." Dipper insisted and turned to his sister, "I also think Bill might be back."

Mabel said nothing but it was clear the theory conflicted her. She wanted the demon to come home just as much as everyone else did. Dipper finished fixing the curtains to a level he deemed satisfactory. The room was much more lit than it had been before but it was still dim â€" hopefully dim enough for Stan not to notice.

"Grenda and Marius are waiting for us." Mabel eventually said.

"Mabelâ€|" Dipper strained.

"No, Dipper, you don't get it." Mabel frowned and her eyes watered as she glared at the floor, "I don't want your false hope. It's hard enough to get over Grunkle Ford's death already, I don't need to be held back by your wishful thinking."

"This might not have anything to do with itâ€|" Dipper tried.

"It's the only thing that could have anything to do with it." Mabel refuted, "The last time Grunkle Stan worked on something in secret, it was to fix the portal to bring Grunkle Ford back. If he's working on something in secret again, and with Bill no less, it will be to bring Grunkle Ford back again. It's the only thing he could be doing. It's the only thing he would do."

Dipper wanted to argue that nothing was definite yet, but he stopped himself. What his sister had just said; it lead him to believeâ€|" "So you did notice?" He asked rhetorically, "You noticed all the things that I did about Grunkle Stan acting off? You knew it wasn't just grief if at all, but you decided to ignore it?"

Mabel sighed and turned her gaze back to the ground. "We can't get him back." She said, "No matter how hard we try, there's nothing we can do. I don't want to suffer when you all realise that your efforts, your wishes, your hope were for nothing. I don't know if I could bear to deal with the level of pain that it implies."

Dipper stared at his sister for a long time in silence. He wasn't sure what to think about her confession. He was, admittedly, a bit angry that she had scolded him in such a way and all but called him delusional for having noticed the things he did. However, maybe she was right. Maybe he ought to do like Mabel and drop the matter to avoid any more pain. The Grim Reaper was right, there was no way to access the Void. No creature in existence had the power to pierce into that dimension and retrieve the souls that were casted into it.

"Maybe you're rightâ€|" Dipper conceded, "But if that's what they're

doing, why would they keep it a secret? Wouldn't you want to do anything you could to help if they were on to something that could potentially work?"

Mabel looked up and considered the question. "Yeah, I guessâ€¦I guess I would." She answered.

"So would I. Heck, no offense but I would probably be more useful than you given the amount of time I spent with Grunkle Ford learning about everything he knew." Dipper added, "So why wouldn't they tell us?"

Mabel thought for a moment and soon she came to the same conclusion as Dipper had. Her eyes widened as she gasped.

"Yeah." He agreed, "What they're working on has to be morally wrong or incredibly dangerous."

"Then what do we do?" She asked.

"First thing's first." Dipper said as he walked over and took his sister's hand, "We need to confirm that this is what's actually going on. So let's goâ€¦"

Dipper lead the way towards the door when, suddenly, they were in the forest. There was a moment of incredulousness wherein either twin could hardly believe they were where their eyes were telling them. They looked around in astonishment and Dipper felt his heart race as anxiety rose. How had that happened? Had Bill teleported them? Had the demon somehow overheard their conversation? But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed unlikely. Then, Dipper remembered the recently passed summer and how he had somehow managed to run all the way to Robbie's house in time to stop Mabel from killing him. Now that he thought about it, he really shouldn't have been able to have made the run but he hadn't thought much about it at the time given the urgency of the situation.

"How did youâ€¦?" Mabel asked in awe.

"Iâ€¦I don't know." Dipper admitted. "Iâ€¦I didn't mean to, it justâ€¦happened."

The most he had done was briefly think about how waiting in the forest would be ideal. Then, when they would be sure that Stan thought they were gone, they could creep back towards the house and spy.

"Do you even know where you brought us?" Mabel questioned and glanced around again.

Dipper couldn't recognize his surroundings either. "No." he said.

"Well, it's a good thing I can make us fly out of here." She said and made her magic bubble, "Hopefully we get back in time to see if your theory gets confirmed."

When Mabel floated up into the sky, they found Dipper hadn't teleported them too far from the Mystery Shack. Nonetheless, had they walked, it would have taken them about an hour. Dipper remained quiet during the short bubble ride it took them to get back home. He stared at his hands pensively and thought back on the first manifestation of his power. It had been during a moment of great desperation where life and death had been at play. Had he not been able to get to Mabel in time, Robbie would likely be dead or the Grim Reaper could have intervened and killed her instead. When his sister had first unlocked her magical potential, it had been under similar circumstances. Had she not been able to create a shield to protect them, Tad would have killed them.

"Don't worry about it too much." Mabel said as she lowered them into the cover of the ring of trees surrounding the Mystery Shack. "If Bill's really here, we'll get him to explain it to us."

"Yeahâ€¦" Dipper agreed as they touched the ground. He had no doubt Bill would be all too eager to inform them, heck he might even congratulate him. _Of course_, Dipper thought, _I assume that's what would happen if the circumstances were differentâ€¦_

Dipper thought a lot about why Stan and Bill would decide to keep them in the dark if they really were trying to find a way to break into the Void â€" though, at this point, it was practically a fact that that was what they were up to. Naturally, it had to be because what they were doing was either immoral or incredibly dangerous if not both. However, Dipper reckoned further that whatever it was they were doing had to be so bad that they would likely attempt to stop them upon learning of their activities. If that were the case, then odds were they might never get an explanation out of Bill as he would consequently become their enemy once more.

He lamented the thought.

Dipper didn't want to go against his family nor against the effort to bring Ford back to life; but he would do it for the greater good. If what Stan and Bill were doing was as terrible as he suspected, Ford would want them to be stopped.

But we still don't know anything yetâ€¦ Dipper reminded himself, _One thing at a time, it might not be so badâ€¦_

The twins carefully crept forward and stopped at the edge of the clearing, taking care in remaining hidden behind the brush. Dipper glanced at his phone to check the time. They hadn't been gone for more than twenty minutes. Had he not teleported them so far away on accident, they could easily have crept into position without the fear of getting caught. Now he dreaded that Stan would spot them as they stealthily tried to get near the Shack. Time was of the essence and they had to find a way there without getting caught lest they missed the moment they needed to witness â€" whether it be the code Stan plugged into the vending machine or Bill appearing.

"What are we waiting for?" Mabel asked quietly.

"We need to get close, but I don't know where Stan is," Dipper explained, "What if we try sneaking up to the house and he sees us because he was by a window?"

"Can't you just teleport us to where we ought to be?" Mabel asked and Dipper felt, frankly, a bit stupid for not having thought of it.

"Iâ€|don't know." He admitted and took her hand, "But I'll try."

He closed his eyes and strained to concentrate on where he wanted to go, yet nothing happened. Dipper began feeling nervous and anxious, they were potentially wasting crucial time. Mabel frowned at him; "What are you wâ€" she began but never finished. All of a sudden, their surroundings changed and rather than be on the outside, they were inside the Mystery Shack store.

"Damn itâ€" Dipper cursed lowly.

However, neither twin had too much time to dally on the misfire Dipper had made. They heard steps coming from behind the door linking the Shack's store to the living quarter. The twins exchanged panicked looks before dashing for the counter and hiding behind it in the nick of time. Both covered their mouths and held their breaths as they waited to see if they had been compromised.

Stan walked in the room, unaware he wasn't alone. He stopped all the same after taking a few steps in, noticing the curtains were raised. That being said, he couldn't remember whether that was normal or not. He shrugged it off all the same and headed towards the vending machine. He passed by the counter and failed to notice his great niece and nephew, much to their relief. He paused in front of the machine and Dipper tried peeking over but his angle didn't allow him to see much of anything.

After a moment of brief hesitation, Stan punched in the new code to the vending machine. Dipper cursed to himself internally. Though they now knew Stan was clearly up to something and had changed the passcode for the secret entrance, they didn't know it. Luckily, Mabel was an experienced magic-user â€" or, at the very least, more experienced than he â€" and could probably break down the door. Despite alerting them to their presence immediately, Dipper was sure they wouldn't manage to hide what they were doing before they got to them.

The vending machine slid open and then closed as soon as Stan walked past its threshold. They heard him sigh deeply and mutter something to himself beneath his breath, but neither could make out the words. Once the vending machine shut itself, silence fell upon them. They stewed in it, hesitating to move for the longest time before they were sure it would be fine. Dipper stood up first, extending his hand to his sister to help her to her feet.

"You're going to have to learn how to figure out your teleporting thing." Mabel whispered, "That could have been really bad."

"It was your idea." Dipper defended quietly.

The two walked to the vending machine and stared at it. Dipper was frustrated and glared at the numbered pad. He didn't like the thought of barging in but they had no other choice.

"Mabel." He whispered, "Break it open."

"What? Why?" Mabel fired back, her tone conveying that she thought it was a terrible idea.

"We don't have a choice." He said, "We don't know the code."

"_I_ know it." She disagreed and stuck out her tongue as she wandered to the pad, "Bet you think all my early teenage years of obsessing over boybands and music aren't as dumb now, hun?"

Dipper frowned in confusion but his sister elaborated further by plugging in the code. The vending machine soon slid open.

"Whatâ€¦?" He muttered in awe.

"The beeps of each keys sound different." Mabel explained briefly, "I memorized each pitch of the ones Grunkle Stan pushed. You've got my music obsession phase to thank for that; I don't think I would have been this perceptive to resonances otherwise."

"Maybe those years weren't wasted." Dipper conceded and she grinned brightly, "But Sev'ral Timez is still overrated."

"You take that back!" Mabel gasped in indignation.

Dipper chuckled quietly, "Maybe later, come on." He said and led the way into the hidden lab.

They walked down the long set of stairs that led into the basement. The walk, though familiar, was eerie and unsettling. Dipper's mind continuously wandered to the possibilities of what Stan and Bill could be doing down there. He hoped it wasn't as bad as he feared it would be. He hoped it was something he could get behind and help see to fruition. He hoped so many things and yet, a part of him knew it was all in vain. The twins consequently halted in front of the elevator that would take them the rest of the way into the lab and exchanged wary looks. This was it.

Dipper reached over and pressed the button to call back the elevator. They hoped this action would go by unnoticed but it wouldn't change anything. Whether Stan and Bill knew they were coming or not, it was far too late to hide what they were doing. They would find out the truth one way or another. The doors slid open and they walked in. Mabel tapped the button to shut the doors immediately and they began their decent. The calm elevator music almost seemed to be mocking their stressed situation and only increased the tension.

They watched as the arrow above the doors slowly tilted towards the 'L' on the right side of the semi-circle. A few seconds later, a soft ding resounded as the arrow reached its target. The doors slid open instantly and the twins crouched. Fortunately, no one was around to witness their entry. They sneaked into the hall and kept to the walls as they made their way further into the lab. The closer they got to Ford's open workspace, the easier they could make out voices. One of them was obviously Stan's. It was unmistakable. The other wasn't as easy to recognize but Dipper assumed it was Bill. Who else could it be? When they got close enough to actually be able to make out the spoken words clearly, they stopped.

"I checked the house a couple of times." Stan assured, "They're either really gone or really good at hiding."

"That's not reassuring." Bill replied.

"Whatever. _Don't_ catch some fresh air, I don't care." Stan shrugged, "But you _should_ go take a shower. You smell bad."

They heard a finger snap.

"There. All clean. I even smell like daisies." Bill responded cheekily, and if Dipper had any doubts as to whether Stan really was speaking to the demon, they all disappeared instantly. The second man was undoubtedly Bill.

"Ugh, you do." Stan grumbled, "Way too much too; it's nauseating."

Dipper and Mabel exchanged looks. They took two big sniffs and their faces scrunched up. They could smell Bill from where they hid. He really had gone overboard with the perfume.

"You're going to have to make up your mind." Bill shot back, annoyed, "Do you want me to smell like sweat and overall grossness or like daisies?"

"Fine, fine." Stan sighed, "You seem to be in a chipper mood. It's refreshing considering how you've been the last two months."

Two months? Bill had been back for two months but Grunkle Stan hadn't said a thing? Dipper frowned. Was it possible that he really had seen Bill by the side of the road two months ago when he and Mabel were leaving Gravity Falls? Did he approach Stan with this idea then?

"Why do you think?" Bill returned and began walking away, "We're almost done. In a few hours, everything'll be back to the way it should be."

"I hope you're right." Stan sighed and began walking as well. They were moving further away from where the twins were hidden and it was getting harder to hear them clearly again.

"I am." Bill assured.

"You knowâ€¦" The old man continued hesitantly, "The kids really miss you." There was a pause filled with a lot of tension, "Mabel talks about you a lot. About how she wants you to come home."

"Stop." Bill mumbled softly.

"Dipper isn't as vocal," Stan persisted, "But I know he feels the same way."

"Stop it." Bill repeated a little louder, "What's this guilt tripping supposed to accomplish now? I'm going to see them again soon."

"I'm just saying you should at least reach out to them." Stan explained, "Use your magic to dial either of their cell phones and tell them you're okay."

"I won't have to do that because all of this is going to be over in a

couple of hours." Bill insisted and walked off hastily; his steps sounding a bit harsher, "Besides, I spoke with them two days ago."

"What? When?" Stan fired rapidly, but the answers to his question suddenly dawned on him before the demon had the chance to answer, "Over the phone when I was busy"

"Yup." The demon confirmed.

"You idiot!" Stan barked and was about to go on a rant when he was stopped.

"Calm down. They didn't even know it was me." Bill assured, "They thought I was you. And by 'they' I mean Pine Tree. I didn't get a chance to speak with Shooting Star."

Dipper blinked in realisation. It was the time when he had called from Wal-Mart; when Stan was seemingly yelling at Manly Dan about nearly breaking something. He had also made a request for a brand of tea he had run out of before hanging up. As it turned out, he hadn't been talking to his great uncle like he thought; it was Bill. It explained the qualms he had had about their conversation.

"You could have screwed us over." Stan reproached.

"Hey, you're the one who kept nagging me to talk to them." Bill defended.

"You smartass" Stan grumbled. "You made Dipper really suspicious."

"It's all in the past. Bygones." Bill maintained, "This'll all be over soon."

The two changed subjects but Dipper couldn't make out the words anymore. They had wandered too far. He turned towards Mabel whose expression was indescribable. He honestly wasn't sure how to feel either.

"What do we do?" Mabel whispered, "Should we wait to hear anything else?"

"I don't think there's anything else to hear." He whispered back and glanced at the corner just ahead. "I think it's time we find out what they're up to."

Mabel nodded firmly. The two stood and shook out the tension in their legs. Then they gave each other a firm look before walking around the corner. Dipper wasn't sure what he expected, but what he saw was far from anything he had imagined. His mouth fell open in awe. Before them stood the portal they had first seen five years ago. It looked slightly different from then; more polished, refined and much, much bigger. He looked it over frantically, hardly believing it was truly in front of him when he caught sight of an altar just a few feet in front of it – at least, it looked like an altar.

Dipper moved towards it cautious and, upon closer inspection, it looked more like an average table. What was truly troubling was who was on it. Encased in a blue light of what could only have been magic

was Ford; lifeless and yet perfectly preserved. Bill must have kept his body from decomposing with his powers.

"Is thatâ€¦Grunkle Fordâ€¦?" Mabel asked uneasily.

The twins stood in silence, their hands having found the other's in search for both support and comfort. They slowly crept closer, beholding their great uncle. The magic used had really done a great job in preventing the start of any of the decomposition stages. He even looked like he had some colour to his skin. If Dipper hadn't known any better nor witnessed his death, he would have thought the man was sleeping.

"What the hellâ€¦?" Dipper muttered and looked up at the portal.

However, a clang from behind drew his attention away. The twins darted their eyes to the source of the sound and found Bill standing before them with a dumbfounded and troubled look. The demon had dropped a thick piece of metal that laid at his feet. Despite having recently used magic to clean himself up, he looked absolutely tired. There were bags beneath his eyes and his posture conveyed his exhaustion all the more â€" shoulders slack and hands trembling ever so slightly.

"Thisâ€¦isn't how it was supposed to goâ€¦" he muttered.

8. How Far We've Come

Seeing Bill again brought about a mix of conflicting emotions. He looked good albeit tired. Incredibly tired. He wore a plain, black v neck tee shirt and yellow jeans that matched his hair. Despite having recently used magic to clean himself, his clothes were covered in what were most likely oil stains and dust. Dipper held onto his sister's hand slightly tighter. A part of him wanted to run to the demon and hug him â€" to tell him how much he missed him and how relieved he was that he had finally returned to them. But he couldn't. Dipper had listened. He had heard. Bill had been back for two months and secretly slaved away in Ford's hidden lab with Stan to, apparently, rebuild the portal.

Mabel returned the squeeze, eyes still locked on the demon. She looked like she wanted to cry and run to him as well but, like Dipper, she stayed herself. It relieved him to see her show such restraint. Had she not, he wasn't sure he could have brought himself not to follow in her steps and to not forget about the greater good he had sworn to uphold. As it was, Dipper was sure he would soon be opposing Bill. The tension was suffocating and only got heavier when Stan walked out from one of the back rooms.

"Hey, Bill, what are youâ€¦" he stopped himself when he saw his niece and nephew. His eyes fell wide open and panic overtook him, "No, no, no," he rushed, "You're not supposed to be here! You're supposed to be out!"

"Fezâ€¦" Bill started.

"What's going on?" Dipper interrupted.

The two men at the other end of the room snapped their mouths shut and exchanged uneasy looks. They stayed quiet for a very long time and neither seemed particularly keen on explaining anything. It frustrated Dipper who thought he and Mabel deserved answers. They had been kept in the dark for two months while they undertook this project and he frankly felt betrayed. They were a family weren't they? They were supposed to be a team. They were supposed to attack every supernatural related problem together. Why had they been dismissed like ignorant children?

"You already know what's going on." Bill responded quietly, "You're a smart kid. You both are."

"Tell us!" Dipper demanded.

"What's there to say, Dipper?" Stan asked dejectedly.

"Why?" Mabel queried, voice strained from the knot in her throat. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Stan looked like he wanted to answer but ultimately didn't. He looked away ashamedly. He didn't know what to tell them. It was obvious they wanted the truth but he didn't want to say it.

Mabel bit her lower lip and glanced towards Bill. He flinched under her hard gaze. "Youâ€|" she started, "We've been worried sick for monthsâ€|whyâ€|why didn't you just call?"

"Iâ€|I couldn't." Bill answered and his eyes fell upon Ford's body behind them. Dipper saw then just how hard he took his great uncle's passing. He hadn't come even remotely close to imagining the incredible anguish the demon felt. "Not untilâ€|not until I saved him."

"You can't save him." Mabel replied apprehensively, "The Grim Reaper wasn't lying. Nothing is strong enough to pull a soul out of the Void."

Dipper was expecting the demon to lash out in anger and vehemently deny the presented information. Instead, he got quite the opposite reaction.

"That's where you're wrong," Bill countered excitedly; he walked towards the portal and gestured at it animatedly. He was desperate to convince them what they were doing was right â€" was safe, "The Grim Reaper said no being was powerful enough. We're not going to use a 'being', we're going to use science."

"The theory is that the portal will be able to create a door into the Void." Stan explained, following the demon, "This should be possible seeing as we're using science not magic."

"Isn't magic just science we don't understand?" Dipper asked sceptically. It was how Ford had described it to him once upon a time.

"That's Sixer's way of seeing it as a scientist." Bill smirked, "Everything is comprised of small things which they themselves are comprised of even smaller things. These things can consequently be observed and documented in a scientific fashion; but it doesn't make

them science. Not really. Magic is still magic and it's vastly different from science."

"Isn't it going to take a lot of power to get this thing started?" Mabel enquired, "Where are you going to get all of it?"

"We've already taken care of that." Stan assured, "The United States and Canada will suffer from a huge albeit temporary power outage, but it's not the end of the world."

"Not the end of the world?" Dipper repeated, upset. He was trying hard to keep all of his anger from spilling out uncontrollably at once. "Some people are on life support; some others will be in the middle of getting life-saving operations! You'll kill them all!"

"I can bring them back." The demon said.

"And at what cost?" Dipper retorted, "The last time you brought people back, a Grim Reaper was unleashed into the world and began slaughtering everyone that was meant to die."

"That won't happen this time!" Bill snapped, "We sealed it away! It'll all be fine! It'll all be okay!"

"No it won't!" Dipper yelled back, "That's not how things work! It never is! Did you even stop to consider what else might be in the Void and could be unleashed?"

"It's nothing I can't handle." Bill insisted.

"And what if it's stronger than you anticipated?" Dipper challenged, "What if you can't stop it? When we deal with one threat, something worse is always around the corner! This time it's the destruction of the time space continuum!"

Bill immediately shut his mouth. It was clear he had hoped Dipper forgot.

"Yeah, I didn't forget." He said lowly. Mabel gave him a confused look and he breathed heavily before explaining, "The first thing Grunkle Ford did when he came back to our world was scold Grunkle Stan. He told him he could have destroyed the time space continuum; that the portal was dangerous because it was unstable."

Mabel gasped in shock. She turned her worried eyes to the other two men. Now she knew what was at play and the gravity of the situation.

"We made it better." Bill instantly declared. "Fez showed me the early blueprints and we made adjustments. For someone who never finished high school; he's a heck of an engineer."

"You certainly made it bigger." Dipper remarked cynically.

"Didn't Grunkle Ford say there was a fifty percent chance the universe would break when Grunkle Stan used the portal the first time?" Mabel asked nervously.

"Yes." The teen confirmed uneasily, "We were okay last time but it

only means that, this time, the world's definitely going to end."

"It isn't!" Bill objected, "We fixed it! It's better! It's safer!"

"Then what are the odds the time space continuum implodes?" Dipper barked; "And don't lie to me."

The demon faltered before answering; "Our odds are safe."

"That's not a precise answer!" Dipper called out and looked at his great uncle for answers, "Grunkle Stan, I know you're a gambler but this is ridiculous!"

"I'd risk it." he stated firmly, much to the brunet's surprise.

"This is why we didn't say anything." Bill grumbled, passing a hand through his golden locks. He looked so exhausted; deflated by grief and countless desperate hours spent searching for a way to bring Ford back. "We knew you wouldn't understand!"

"_You_ don't understand!" Dipper refuted, "Neither of you do! Grunkle Ford wouldn't want this! The risks are too high!"

"I don't care!" The demon yelled and his voice shook the entire room. Dipper was taken aback. It seemed Bill had reached the limit of his patience. "I don't care! I don't care! _I don't care_! I'm not letting that stupid Grim Reaper have even _one_ victory! I'm not letting it take what's _mine_!"

"Grunkle Stan," Dipper turned exasperatedly towards the old man, "You need to stop this. You _know_ he doesn't want this."

"I'm sorry, kid." Stan sighed and looked away, "He's my brother. I just got him back barely five years ago. That's not enough for me. Not after thirty years spent apart."

"This is insane!" Dipper growled, squeezing his sister's hand tighter. He couldn't help but think back to when the Grim Reaper had tasked him to dissuade his family's quest to stop the murders. He was failing again and there would be a dire price to pay once more.

"Tell me either of you wouldn't do it for one another." Stan demanded seriously in a last ditch effort to appeal to them. "Tell me you," he reiterated looking at Dipper, "wouldn't risk destroying the world to bring your sister back; and you," he now looked at Mabel, "tell me you wouldn't do the same thing for your brother" your _best friend_."

"I wouldn't." He stated firmly. "I love her with all my heart but I wouldn't. I'm not the only one who's alive; who's _existing_. I'm not allowed to be that selfish."

"I!" Mabel hesitated. Dipper's heart thumped wildly in his chest in anticipation of the answer. He hoped she was on his side.

"You once told me you trusted me." Stan reminded somberly and her breath hitched.

Dipper tensed as he remembered the dramatic event. Everything had been so insane. Stan had gotten arrested while Dipper and Mabel were being shipped off to who knows where by some random agents; all without much in the way of an explanation. When they figured out what was going on and discovered Ford's hidden lab in the basement, they had no idea whether they could truly trust Stan. They knew the man had his fair share of secrets that were better left unsaid; but this displayed a whole new, dangerous dimension. And yet, Mabel had sided with him. She had opted to trust a man they honestly didn't know anymore. At the time, Dipper had felt completely betrayed by his entire family. Hopefully, things wouldn't turn out the same way â€" hopefully, he wouldn't be opposing Stan and Bill alone.

"Iâ€" Mabel tried again and glanced at her brother. He saw the conflict she was wrestling with as clear as day and held his breath; "I was youngâ€"and stupid. Thankfully, the world was okay butâ€"I don't believe it will be this time." She gripped Dipper's hand gently before looking back at the other two men with conviction, "We've done enough damage. It's time to stop."

"Is that your final answer?" Bill asked grimly. His hands suddenly sparked blue flames.

After everything they had been through, after growing to love the demon and adopting him as an honorary Pines, here they wereâ€"

"Yes." Mabel assured and dropped Dipper's hand to summon her own magic.

Againâ€"

"Do you understand the consequences of your decision?" Bill insisted and Stan looked very tense. "I'll become â€" _we'll_ become your enemies. We can't allow you to stop us. Not this time. Not with what's at stake."

On opposite sidesâ€"

"Yes." Dipper confirmed resolutely.

To say their relationship's development with Bill hadn't been a rollercoaster from the moment he stumbled back to the Shack, naked, after four years, would be an understatement. He had gone from an enemy, to a victim, to a friend, and finally to family. Dipper had thought their new bond, the one he shared with the entire family, would last through time and that regardless of the fact that he was and always would be a demon, Bill would be changed for the better. But, despite everything, here they were again as though it were inevitable.

"Very well." The demon nodded and glanced at Stan. He waited until the latter gave him a small nod. Once he got his signal, he reacted. Bill's movements were swift and precise; in a flash he had erected a triangle cage around the twins. Mabel barely had the chance to move even a muscle. She stumbled back in surprise before chancing a go at the magic imprisoning them. As expected, it did nothing. Bill

strolled towards them leisurely, a dark look in his eyes. "I'm not going to fight either of you." He said.

"You'll kill us all!" Dipper protested vainly and smashed his fist against the prison.

"Then we'll die." Bill replied.

9. A Lionheart

Bill had moved the magic cage in which he had imprisoned the twins away from the portal and where Ford laid. He shepherded them on the complete opposite end of the room where they could observe as he and Stan finished the final adjustments to the portal. There was no point in hiding them in some other room. Soon it would all be over. Despite the seemingly hopeless predicament, the twins didn't abandon all hope just yet. Mabel flung as much magic as she could at their prison until she nearly passed out due to the spent energy. Unfortunately, she hadn't even made a dent. She had only drawn the pity of the demon who gave them desolated looks every now and again.

"Grunkle Stan!" Dipper cried and smashed his fist against the magical barrier whenever the old man passed by. He always walked faster to avoid having to stay around for longer than he needed. It was clear he was wracked with guilt. Dipper wished he would just give into it and stop their madness. "Grunkle Stan, please! You know Grunkle Ford wouldn't want this! He even told you!"

"I'm sorryâ€¦" He muttered and left to somewhere where Dipper's voice couldn't reach him.

There was a long moment where the twins were left alone to gaze at the enormous portal machine and glance at the table on which Ford laid. The next person to reappear was Bill. Dipper went to shout and protest but hesitated. He didn't know what he could say to him to convince him to stop. Where with Stan all he had to do was poke at his sense of guilt; the same couldn't be done for Bill. If he was feeling guilty â€" though there was a strong chance he wasn't â€" he would simply push past it and do what he had selfishly set his mind to.

"Bill pleaseâ€¦" Dipper begged, letting his fist slide down the barrier. The demon glanced away, "Don't do thisâ€¦"

"I have to." He muttered quietly.

"You don't!" Dipper insisted. "Grunkle Ford really wouldn't want you to!"

"What am I supposed to do then!?" Bill suddenly snapped, "Spend the rest of eternity alone!? I can't die, Pine Tree. If I can't have him, ceasing to exist is the only other preferable outcome to this situation."

"Bill, don'tâ€¦" Mabel tried weakly, though her voice was feeble from the substantial use of magic.

"M-maybe there's another way!" Dipper suggested desperately, "What if we ask a Grim Reaper? They clearly have access to the Void and have

the power to cast souls into it so they _must_ have the power to pull them out too!"

"The Grim Reaper of this universe was sealed away inside your friend." Bill pointed out, "We can't let it out and, even if we did, it wouldn't help us."

"Then what about a Grim Reaper from a different universe?" Dipper asked.

"Don't you think I've already thought of that?" The demon sighed disappointedly, "I lost count of the many universes I traveled to, to get a Grim Reaper to pull Sixer out and return him to me. However, as soon as I mentioned the Void, any and all chances I had of convincing them vanished. It's like it's a rule that all of the souls thrown into it aren't allowed to be retrieved."

"Fine then maybe there's something elseâ€" "

"There is." Bill interrupted and glanced back at the portal, "And it's almost done."

Then he left and despite all of Dipper's shouts and pleas to have him stop; he didn't. Only after a few more hours of no positive results did he begin to resolve himself to their fates. He was likely living his last few hours. There was no way the portal wouldn't destroy the universe the moment it was activated. He sat down and leaned against one of their prison's walls, tilting his head up towards the ceiling. Mabel stared at him quietly for a moment before following suit. She sat down next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder. The quietness that weighed over them was dreadful â€" filled with the silent understanding that soon they would be dead and there was nothing they would be able to do.

Their moment of wallowing was interrupted by a musical beep emanating from Mabel's pocket.

"Ohâ€" " She said and smiled melancholically as she took out her phone, "It's from Grendaâ€" she wants to know why we never showed upâ€" "

"What are you going to tell her?" Dipper asked despondently, "Sorry, our late great uncle's demon boyfriend trapped us in some magic prison so he and Grunkle Stan can destroy the universe in a futile attempt to revive Grunkle Ford?"

"It almost just doesn't matter at this point, hun?" Mabel acknowledged and shoved her phone back in her pocket without having offered a response.

"I'm just soâ€"angryâ€" " Dipper admitted, "The Grim Reaper warned me this would happen; it told me how to avoid it andâ€"and I failedâ€" "

"It's not your fault." Mabel muttered, "If anyone's to blame it's me."

"You didn't do anything." Her brother objected.

"If I had been stronger," She insisted, "If I hadn't been blinded by

that dumb magic puberty thing I could have saved Grunkle Fordâ€|None of this would have happenedâ€|"

"There was nothing you could have done." Dipper refuted, "And that's not a sign of weakness or helplessness. Sometimes there's just nothing to be done. I was the one who was given the opportunity to decide how things would pan out. I shouldn't have let you guys talk me into stopping the Grim Reaper. We should have just let it do what it was supposed to do."

"Then I guess we're all at fault." Mabel concluded, "The blame doesn't just fall on you; it's all of us. _We_ wanted to save everyone. We should have listened to you but instead we roped you in. I just wishâ€|I just wish none of this would have happenedâ€|that there was a way to have a good ending, you know?"

"Yeahâ€|" Dipper agreed, "We're so youngâ€|and now we're dead."

"To think we had our whole lives ahead of us." Mabel smirked sadly, "I wanted to get married, have kids, get a nice job, and travel the worldâ€|Guess it's nothing more than a dream now."

Dipper said nothing. His mind wandered to what he had wanted out of life. Mabel's listed points essentially resembled what he had also wanted. But then he thought about Robbie. They had never decided what would become of their relationship. They had never officially decided whether they would date or not and had consequently left it under the status of 'it's complicated'. The teen's hand moved to his pocket and trailed the outline of his phone through the fabric. Robbie would never know how he really felt. He supposed he could text him now but there was hardly a point to it. Bill and Stan were just about done. Soon everything would be over and nothing would matter anymore.

"We haven't seen Bill or Grunkle Stan in a while." Mabel remarked. Suddenly, the red numbered timer above the portal activated and began counting down. Fifteen minutes until enough energy was amassed to activate the machine and destroy the universe. "Oh." She said after a moment, "That's why."

"Yeah." Dipper sighed in defeat. Fifteen minutes until death.

"I wish there was something we could doâ€|" Mabel admitted, "Something more. I don't want to die like this."

"Waitâ€|" Dipper muttered in realisation, "I never tried teleportingâ€|"

"I don't think you can." Mabel said, "The cell's made of magic. I couldn't even make a dent."

"Maybe, but it's worth a shot." Dipper declared and stood up, "I don't know about you but I don't want to wait for death sitting on my ass. Not if I don't have to."

Mabel smirked and stood as well, "Then go for it. Let's see what happens."

Dipper took his sister's hand and closed his eyes to concentrate. He focused on where he wanted to be and felt something strange begin to bubble in his chest. The feeling exploded, overwhelming his body and

then disappeared entirely. Then, when the brunet opened his eyes he was almost where he wanted to be. He had wanted to teleport to the area where they always saw Bill and Stan disappear to but instead he found himself in the middle of the room, near Ford, with his sister.

"It worked." Mabel murmured in astonishment. "I really didn't think it would workâ€¦"

"Me neither to a certain degreeâ€¦" Dipper admitted, but shook his head. He could praise himself later, now they had to stop the portal from activating before it was too late. "Whatever, we've got to stop this thing."

"Right." Mabel agreed and her hands flared with her magic, "I'll break it down!"

"No! Don't!" Dipper intervened quickly, "You could cause an explosion. As much as I want to save the universe from imploding, I don't want to kill us in the process."

"Then how are we supposed to do it?" Mabel questioned, dissipating her magic.

"Um," Dipper thought nervously, "There's obviously a base room running this thing." He reasoned and glanced at the corner he wanted to teleport to, "Probably over there. There'll be computers and a way to shut it down from there."

"But Bill and Stan are there." Mabel reminded, "How are we going to get through them."

"We'reâ€¦" Dipper began but faltered. He really didn't want to but it seemed like they had no other choice, "We'll have to fight them, I guess."

"Evenâ€¦Grunkle Stan?" She hesitated.

Dipper chewed his lower lip and glanced at the clock. Nearly five minutes had lapsed, "We don't have a choice. I'llâ€¦I'll take care of him. You just handle Bill."

Mabel nodded but was still evidently hesitant about what they had to do. She followed her brother nonetheless towards the area from which Stan and Bill continuously came and went for the past few hours. When they rounded the corner, they came upon a place with a glass window giving out on the portal. Behind it they saw Stan manning the computer and Bill standing next to him. Their eyes widened in shock upon noticing them and both ran out to meet them.

"Here goesâ€¦everything." Dipper whispered to himself.

"What the hell are you kids doing!?" Stan barked as he pushed pass the door.

"How did you get out of my cage!?" Bill demanded.

Rather than talk, Mabel acted immediately. She flung a few bursts of magic towards Bill to separate him from Stan. This time she kept moving and left her brother's side to avoid getting trapped the same

way once more. Dipper glanced at her warily. He hoped she would be okay.

Bill dodged the attacks effortlessly, "I don't want to fight you." He frowned.

"Then stop what you're doing!" Mabel commanded.

"We can't let you go through with this." Dipper told them. "I get it; it's hard letting go of someone who passed away but this isn't the solutionâ€|"

"We can't." Bill replied.

"Then you'll have to fight me." Mabel retorted and threw more bursts, which the demon easily evaded.

"This wasn't your average death, Dipper." Stan reminded, "Ford didn't die from natural causes; his soul was ripped out of his body and thrown into the Void."

"He's gone, Grunkle Stan." Dipper stated, "And he wouldn't approve of what you're doing."

"Shooting Starâ€|" Bill warned, his hands igniting with blue flames.

"I might agree with you if he were sent some place I knew he wasn't suffering." Stan confessed, "However, we know nothing about the Void aside that no being in any universe is powerful enough to penetrate it. I'm not going to let my brother suffer for all eternity."

"You're not going to like how this endsâ€|" the demon muttered.

"We've got no choice. It's either this or the destruction of the universe." Mabel replied.

"Just let this happen." Stan requested. "Trust in me. Trust that this won't be the end."

"I can't." Dipper stated, "It's just too dangerous."

"Then your decision's been made." Bill concluded and raised his left hand.

Mabel reacted quickly and shoved Dipper out of the way with her magic. Her brother narrowly avoided being imprisoned once more. As soon as he was in the clear, she turned her attention back to the demon but he had vanished. Bill appeared behind her and she barely blocked his attack in time. The magic shield she conjured propelled her a few feet away but she didn't lose her balance. It was obvious Mabel stood no chance against him; but all she had to do was keep him busy until Dipper found a way to shut off the portal machine.

"Do you see this?" Dipper asked, gesturing his sister, "This is what we've become."

"I can't let you get past me." Stan stated.

Dipper sighed upon realising he really wouldn't be able to reason with the old man. "Luckily, you can't stop me." He whispered.

Before Stan had the chance to ask what he meant, the teen closed his eyes and teleported into the control room. He hadn't landed as close to the door as he had wanted to, but it couldn't be helped. He still had a long way to go to master his newfound ability. His great uncle was dumbstruck by the magic he had used and by the time he realised Dipper was now behind him; the latter had shut and locked the door. Despite there being no way for Stan to make his way in, he banged on the door madly.

"Dipper! Dipper don't!" He yelled desperately, "It's going to work! I swear it's going to work and we're all going to be okay! Just trust me! Please!"

Dipper glanced through the window. The portal was beginning to spark to life. There were only six minutes left on the timer above the enormous machine. His eyes then moved to his sister who was evidently being overwhelmed by Bill's retaliation. It seemed the demon was trying to trap her in his magic prison but she kept barely evading it, much to his growing frustration. The brunet shook his head and looked at the computer layout in front of him.

"He's your uncle!" Stan shouted, "He's your family! He's done so much for you! Are you really going to condemn him like this!?"

The words jarred Dipper who momentarily faltered. In a way, he really was condemning Ford to an eternity in the Void. However, he knew his uncle would forgive him if he knew the circumstances under which he had made the decision. On that note, he returned his attention to the task at hand. The set up was elaborate; littered with monitors, buttons, and various keypads â€" of which the purpose for most generally eluded Dipper. He began panicking as he skimmed over them. There were just so many and there was no manual to figure out which ones he needed to press to turn everything off. Just when he was about to chance his luck, the banging on the metal door suddenly became louder. He jolted and glanced towards it. Stan had changed from smashing his fists onto it to some heavy object he had found.

"Focus." Dipper murmured to himself, "Figure it out."

Five minutes until death.

One of the small monitors seemed to be measuring the portal's stability as well as its power level. The latter's progress was displayed through a bar that was nearly full. The sight of it unnerved Dipper by reasserting the urgency of the situation but he forced himself to stay calm. If he gave in to the panic and desperation he felt, he would make a dire mistake. His eyes moved downwards and noticed a small icon of an arrow pointing left on the bottom left corner of the screen. The brunet found the mouse and clicked it. The layout of the screen changed to something he was more familiar with. It resembled Window's new design and that was something he could work with.

"I won't forgive you for this!" Stan yelled harshly, "If you stop this machine, I'm never going to forgive you!"

Four minutes until death.

Dipper breathed heavily. Stan was probably telling the truth. He supposed it was a consequence he would have to live with. In the end, it was better than the destruction of the universe. Maybe one day Stan would understand why he did what he did and forgive him. But Bill wouldn't. Bill might even kill him for it.

Regardless, Dipper found the control section and the search mechanic. He began typing in the word "abort" when the program redirected him to the abort initiative that had been installed. Despite how Stan and Bill both clearly had no interest in actually employing the function; they had installed it in case something went wrong. Dipper selected the provided link when gravity suddenly failed. He felt himself become lighter as he rose from his chair. Perhaps he really had seen objects beginning to float in the forest that day, and maybe it hadn't been caused by magic but rather by the portal. Nonetheless, Dipper struggled uselessly for a moment, wriggling around before he managed to make his way back to the machine and activate the shutdown procedure.

Three minutes until death.

The brunet was redirected to the abort page and was dismayed to find that it was password protected. He groaned and smacked his face. There was no way he would be able to guess the password not to mention that there was probably a limit to how many times he could enter the wrong one. What made matters worse was that he had no idea who between Bill and Stan had decided what the password would be. If it was the latter, the chances of it actually being a word were much higher than if it was Bill. He lamented what he should do. He wasn't a hacker like Ford; who knew the skill would be so necessary?

"No!" Mabel shrieked and Dipper snapped his gaze up to see his sister had finally been imprisoned in a blue pyramid. "Bill!"

Two minutes until death.

"Bill!" Stan yelled and the demon looked at him, "Dipper got inâ€"

Shit! Dipper panicked. He had to try something; anything. _Maybe the password isâ€| "password"?_

The guess was completely stupid and yet plausible. It was very likely that Bill would have insisted on a complicated password comprised of both numbers and letters whereas his great uncle would have seen it as a bother and unnecessary. In that event and under the impression he and Mabel would never discover their activities, he could have simply decided to use "password". He hoped he was right and reached for the keys just as the timer was nearing the last minute countdown. However, Dipper hadn't even managed to press the 'p' before the window in front of him shattered to bits as Bill lunged through. He looked absolutely terrifying; eyes bursting with ferocity. The demon gripped him by the throat and tossed him out of the room.

"Dipper!" Mabel cried.

"_Enough!_" Bill boomed angrily. He reached towards Dipper and

encased him in blue magic which kept him immobilised. The demon looked absolutely furious. "You two have been nothing more than a nuisance! Do you not want Sixer back!?"

Sixty seconds until death.

"Not like this!" Dipper retorted and he turned to his great uncle in a last ditch effort; "Please stop it! We're all going to die!"

"We're not!" Stan insisted.

"Yes we are!" Dipper shouted, "And you know it! You'll be the man and the demon responsible for the end of our universe!"

"Maybe." Bill conceded, "But there'll be no one around anymore to remember what we've done."

Thirty seconds until death.

"Grunkle Stan!" Mabel begged and smashed her fists uselessly against her magic pyramid cage. Tears were filling her eyes and she kept nervously glancing towards the timer, "Please! Please stop this! We don't want to die! Please!"

Her desperate tone visibly affected him. The old man glanced away, "I'm sorry, sweetie." He said quietly, "I can't. But don't worry, we'll be fine—it'll work. It'll all be okay."

"It won't be okay, damn it!" She growled as tears streamed down her cheeks. "How could you do this!?"

"Sweetie—" he tried.

"Don't call me that!" She snapped, "Not when you're about to kill me and my brother for your own selfish reasons!"

Ten seconds until death.

"You're not going to die." Bill sighed and wandered towards the portal. He took Ford's body and moved it back to the table on which it was meant to lay. He kept their fingers intertwined as he watched the machine begin to spark. A small glow was building at the center of the circle steadily. "This is going to work."

"Dipper!" Mabel sobbed desperately and turned to him. "What do we do!?"

Five.

"Nothing." Stan said, "Just trust us."

Four.

Dipper struggled to move a limb but the task was impossible. Bill's magic kept him perfectly immobile. He couldn't even teleport out of its hold.

Three.

"Mabel!" Dipper shouted, tears falling down his cheeks as well. He couldn't believe this was the end.

Two.

Their gazes moved to the portal. The light that had been slowly building suddenly vanished and the intense whirring of the machines temporarily halted. They all held their breaths.

One.

Then there was an explosion of light and a crushing force.

10. Mais je manque À l'appel

Dipper didn't know what to expect. He didn't know what death would feel like, though he supposed he wasn't truly dead. The portal ripped apart the time space continuum and by that logic their universe had been destroyed. They weren't existing anymore. They simply weren't. So where did that leave them? What then? He didn't feel like anything had changed. He still felt like he had a whole physical body. How strange it was to cease to exist. At most, he had expected everything to just stop but there he was in a white empty space. Existing.

However, the white surrounding him suddenly began to fade to darkness. It terrified him. He didn't understand what was going on. Perhaps he was in the midst of losing his existence? His sense of being? His senses in general? But no. As he soon learned, the contrary was occurring. It was surreal to see shapes steadily take form as the blinding whiteness dissipated and it was even harder to grasp that he wasn't dead. Dipper raised his hand to his face and hardly believed it was truly there; that he was still whole. Slowly, he lowered it and beheld his surroundings.

The blast had utterly destroyed Ford's hidden lab. Everything was trashed the portal machine hung crooked. There was a low humming of machines which was likely the product of the white glow in the circular opening. Through some sort of miracle, the portal hadn't destroyed the universe – not this time, anyway. It took him a moment to make out the silhouette of a man standing in front of the glowing portal.

"Bill!" Dipper rasped weakly. The demon didn't budge. The blast had really done a number on him. He felt sore all over and his left shoulder felt dislocated but the pain was bearable.

He pushed himself onto his knees and immediately felt dizzy and nauseous. The latter feeling quickly intensified and soon he was doubling over, puking his guts out. It was disgusting but Dipper felt better. He made a bigger effort to move away from the mess he had made and stumbled to his feet. Debris littered the path to Bill. He stared at all of it emptily until he remembered Stan and Mabel, though as soon as they crossed his mind, groans caught his attention. The two were slowly finding their feet and that was enough for him to know that they were okay.

With a heavy sigh, Dipper began trudging towards Bill and Ford. The two were the only things that hadn't been toppled over by the shock

wave emitted by the portal. The teen reckoned it must have been because of the demon's magic, though it was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. The portal hadn't destroyed the universe like he had been so sure it would and so a nerve wracking question remained to be answered.

"Bill!" He tried again, closer than he had been before. His voice was still too weak to attract the blonde's attention.

"We're not dead!" Mabel muttered from somewhere behind Dipper. She sounded rough but she would probably be fine.

"Bill!" Dipper cried out, just a few short steps away. He had been louder than before and was sure he was heard this time. But Bill didn't react. The demon's eyes were still glued on the white glow and his hand was still grasping Ford's tightly. "Bill!" he repeated, just behind the demon, "Did it work?"

Bill didn't answer. He didn't even acknowledge Dipper's presence. The teen thus glanced down and noticed that Ford was still encased in the blue magic and looked just as dead as before. His heart gave a painful throb. Had it not work? After all the risks, the lying, and the fighting; had it really not worked? Suddenly, the glow at the center of the machine's circle faltered and quickly began dimming.

"No, no, no!" Bill panicked. He released Ford's hand and ran to the other side of the table, facing the machine without any obstacle. "No, we need more power!"

"We don't have anymore." Stan said and Dipper glanced back in time to see his great uncle move to his side. "Did it not work?"

"W-we need more power!" Bill shouted manically. He glanced around agitatedly for a solution to their problem.

"There's not!"

But Stan was interrupted when Bill suddenly flung magic at the machine. The steady beam of energy stopped the white glow from fading any further, but just barely.

"Damn it, come on!" Bill roared.

Despite all his efforts, the glow began receding again. The demon's desperation increased and he doubled the energy he was using which was already tremendous. The fading stopped but Dipper felt it was only a matter of time before it continued shrinking until it disappeared completely. What that inevitably meant had Stan falling to his knees. Dipper had never seen someone so broken before. The old man's features displayed how incredulous and shattered he was by their apparent failure. Not even science was powerful enough to break into the Void and he had killed millions by creating a blackout spanning over the entirety of a continent. All for nothing.

But Bill wasn't giving up. He continued pumping the portal with energy, vainly hoping that the door to the Void would be successful and that Ford would be able to return. It was heart breaking to behold.

"Bill!" Dipper tried, "Stop it."

Bill ignored him.

"It's over." Mabel chimed, having arrived on her brother's right side. "Just stop it."

"No! It'll work!" He yelled, "We just need more power!"

He increased the magic he was pumping into the large machine and the glow began to grow. For a brief second, Dipper believed his tactic might actually work but then there was a clang like something in the portal had given out. No sooner than the sound had been heard did the white glow abruptly vanish and the machine collapse on itself. Bill narrowly avoided being crushed by the falling metal.

"Bill!" Mabel called out worriedly.

When the dust caused by the fallen bits cleared, they found Bill standing with his back facing them, shoulders between his head. His hands were squeezed into trembling fists and his quiet sobs could be heard now that the whirring had stopped. The demon fell to his knees in utter defeat and he sobbed. Dipper wanted to go to him but he didn't know if he could "not" after he had undoubtedly killed so many people that had depended on the electricity he had just robbed them of for survival. Mabel, however, being of a kinder and more generous heart, could. She ran around the table and gathered him in her arms and Bill just collapsed. He clung to her desperately and cried his heart out. The sight was so heart breaking Dipper began to cry himself.

"I really!" Stan choked out, "I really thought that it would work!"

"Honestly," Dipper muttered as he rubbed his tears away, "At the last seconds, I really hoped it would too if the universe didn't implode."

"Well, the universe's intact." Stan smiled sadly as tears began leaking from his eyes, "But my brother's still gone."

And the man thus abandoned himself to his long repressed grief. He covered his eyes to try to hide his tears but soon gave up. What was the point? Seeing him so weak and upset had Dipper coming undone himself. He got to his knees and wrapped an arm around his great uncle's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Dipper!" he wept, "I'm so, so sorry!"

"Hey!" he said between sobs, "I-I forgive you! okay? I'm sorry too!"

"What are you sorry for?" Stan asked, "I'm the one who was ready to destroy the universe to attempt something so stupid!"

"It wasn't stupid, you had legitimate reasons!" Dipper defended, "Just because I was against you doesn't mean I don't understand why you did it!"

"I could have killed you and your sister." Stan said.

"But you didn't." Dipper replied and forced a smile. "Either way, I forgive you."

Stan remained baffled for a beat, but then he pulled Dipper into a bone crushing hug and cried some more. Dipper clung to the old man and buried his face in his shoulder. "You're too good to me. I don't deserve this." Stan muttered.

"Well, you're getting it anyway." Dipper stated.

And for hours they stayed in the rubble of Ford's lab crying together. When they calmed down enough, the twins guided the two men out of the lab. Dipper noticed the magic glow encasing his great uncle's body dissipate as Bill was lead towards the elevator which, thankfully, still worked. The ride up was long and quiet. They now suffered real grief as any and all hopes to get Ford back were truly cast aside. He really was gone forever and there really was nothing to be done about it anymore.

Mabel sat Bill down on the living room couch and quickly fetched him a cup of tea. She had been so fast Dipper was sure she had used her magic to speed things up. Then she wrapped a blanket around the demon's shoulders and sat next to him. He stared into his steaming mug quietly as silent tears continued to run down his face. Dipper wondered if he was even aware that he was still crying.

The teen moved to help his uncle seat himself on his usual chair when Stan stopped him. "I want to go to my room." He said gruffly. Dipper wasn't sure it was a good idea but complied anyway. The old man probably just wanted to go to sleep. Thus, he helped him to his intended destination and, as predicted, he laid down on his bed and pulled the covers to his chin. Dipper left him, quietly shutting the door. He only took a few steps before he heard Stan break down again. It took everything in his power to leave and return to the living room. Stan wanted to be alone and he would respect his wish no matter how much he didn't want to.

Dipper walked back into the living room and took a seat next to Bill. The three of them sat in silence for a very long time. The brunet glanced at the clock above the TV. It marked one in the morning.

"You must really hate me, hun, Pine Tree!" Bill muttered softly. Dipper looked at his face to see him smiling an empty smile. His eyes were overflowing with grief and torment. "Don't worry about the people who died tonight!" he continued after a moment, "I'll bring them all back tomorrow. No one will remember."

Dipper nodded.

"I don't—I don't hate you." Dipper eventually said, "I don't even think I'm mad at you—maybe I'm disappointed. I'm also a little scared." And his fingers ghosted to his throat. He would never forget the wild look in the blonde's eyes when he grabbed him so harshly.

Bill reacted ever so subtly to the confession. "That's understandable. I don't blame you. Either of you." He said and looked

at Mabel.

"I'm not scared of you." She informed but he didn't seem to believe her. "And I don't blame you either." There was a pause and her gaze shifted to Dipper, "I lied to you," she told him, "When I said I wouldn't do what they were doing to bring you back from a place like the Void; I was lying."

Dipper smirked lightly. "I figured as much." He said, "I'm glad you decided to side with me. I didn't feel so alone this time around."

Then there was silence. Heavy, _suffocating _silence. Dipper leaned against the sofa and tilted his head towards the ceiling. Maybe he was done with the supernatural. After this latest episode, despite how magical and fun it had all been to him before, he wanted nothing to do with it anymore. He almost wanted to pretend none of it existed. Perhaps it would be easier to pretend Bill never happened and Ford simply never was too.

"What happens now?" Mabel asked.

"I don't know." Dipper admitted. They certainly had a lot to think about.

"Well, whatever comes next," Mabel said and looked at Bill, "Please don't leave us. Not again."

"I don't know if I can be here." Bill muttered, "In this houseâ€|it's plagued with so many memories of him...and it hurts just thinking about itâ€|"

"It'll hurt for a long time." Mabel told him, "But then it'll get bearable. Eventually, you'll be back to your normal self and this pain will just be a distant memory."

"What ifâ€|I don't want it to be?" Bill asked honestly as he gripped his cup tightly, "What if I don't want the pain to leave?"

"You've got to let it go." She said sadly.

"I don't want to forget him." Bill confessed.

"Letting go doesn't mean forgetting." Dipper said, "Neither does moving on."

Bill lowered his head and hunched over slightly as he began to cry again. Mabel hugged him from the side and Dipper watched them. He could never imagine the type of anguish Bill felt. He had loved Ford so damn much and here he was, powerless to keep him by his side. He would be alone for all of eternity now. Regardless, he reached over and wrapped his arms around both Bill and Mabel as a sign of comfort.

"It gets better, I promise."

11. Show Me My Silver Lining

Dipper woke up at around noon. He was mildly confused on where he was

and why his surroundings didn't look like his room in the Mystery Shack attic. He gave himself a minute for his mind to clear and, once it did, he remembered that he had fallen asleep on the couch. He glanced to his side and found Bill and Mabel were still sleeping. His sister was resting her head on the demon's shoulder and he rested his head on top of hers. They looked so peaceful. He enjoyed the moment of silence he had while it lasted.

The teen eventually pushed himself up and went to the attic. There, he grabbed a fresh pair of clothes and made a b line for the shower. He took his time and went at his leisure. Though he had taken most of the hot water, he reckoned he deserved it after the wild day he had had yesterday. It had been a rollercoaster of emotions " from being absolutely certain he and everyone he loved was going to die to the vain and unanswered hope that, seeing as the portal hadn't destroyed the universe, perhaps Ford would return to them. Dipper's mind wandered to the body that still laid amidst the ruined portal. Bill had removed his enchantment and soon the body would begin to rot. They should give him a proper burial. It was long overdue.

When Dipper finished his shower, he expected to find Bill and Mabel awake but was surprised to see they were still sleeping. Regardless, he wasn't about to pull them from their slumber. Surely they would wake up soon on their own. Instead, he went to the kitchen to grab a snack and found Stan. The old man was seated at the table, head leaning against his propped up hand as he stared emptily at the newspaper in front of him. It was still rolled up in the elastic it had been delivered in.

"Grunkle Stan?" He asked softly.

"One million dead." He said quietly. Dipper gave him a puzzled look as he approached him to get a better look at the newspaper, "The blackout I caused killed one million people and injured ten times more."

Dipper turned the tube and saw the front page headline. He sucked in a sharp breath and glanced at his great uncle pitifully. To think such a catastrophe had been caused with the most honest and good of intentions. If this were a movie, Stan would have received the majority of the audience's support and cheers. Risking the world to bring back one's brother was considered noble and Dipper struggled to understand why. Maybe it was because the citizens who would inevitably die were actors and so the audience was indifferent to their fate seeing as they wouldn't really be dead. How would people react in real life? Surely they would demand the death penalty or something just as horrible.

"The death toll isn't even definite." Stan added, "There's no way for them to know for sure when most of the continent still doesn't have any electricity."

"It won't matter." Dipper said, "Bill's going to reverse everything. Everything's going to be okay."

"I guess they'll all be okay." Stan conceded, "But it doesn't change the fact that I killed them. Once upon a time, over one million people were killed because I selfishly wanted to bring my brother back. And it didn't even work."

Dipper didn't know what to say. He should probably try comforting his great uncle but the truth was that he didn't deserve it. He was right; he had killed so many people it was utterly ridiculous. And yet, even if the brunet decided he was worth pitiful words of comfort, what was he supposed to say? He couldn't claim that Stan didn't know. He did know and he expected people to die, but he treated it lightly because Bill was around and could fix everything. Dipper wondered if Stan still would have gone through with it had they not had an ex-machina at their disposal.

"Nothing's going to be the same anymore, is it?" Dipper asked quietly.

"No, I'm afraid not." Stan sighed, "I really fucked everything up."

"It wasn't just you." Dipper said, "You weren't alone. Bill's also to blame."

"I still feel alone in this." Stan admitted, "I mean, how much do you think Bill really cares about all the people he and I killed? Humans, for the most part, mean nothing to him. He's not going to feel the same guilt I'm feeling right now."

"Why didn't you listen to us?" Dipper asked and took a seat opposite the old man, "Why didn't you stop all of this when you had the chance?"

"I love my brother." Stan answered with a sad smile, "I love my family and I guess I really would do insane things for them."

"Do you regret killing all those people?" The teen asked.

"Honestlyâ€|no." The other answered, "But I regret having done it for nothing â€" even if their deaths will only be temporarily my fault."

Dipper sighed and was reminded of something his great uncle had said over the summer. It had been when he was under the impression Bill had broken another wall in the house with magic. Ford had brushed it off, claiming it could easily be fixed without having to spend even a little money, but Stan insisted that the handy ability shouldn't be an excuse to continue 'destructive' activities. Dipper couldn't help but think about how pertinent the claim could currently be given their circumstances. Stan was talking like Bill would always be there to fix his enormous fuck ups; but that was only so true. What if the demon decided to return to his home dimension? What then?

"Don't worry." Stan eventually continued, "I'm not going to pull one of these stunts again. I'm done. I've lost too many people over the course of these shenanigans."

He was right. First it had been Tad, then Manly Dan and, finally, Ford. Stan truly had lost a lot of people from the moment Bill had stumbled upon the Mystery Shack bleeding and beaten. Out of them all, he had also probably suffered the most too.

"Thanks for not giving me any fake pity, Dipper." He thanked and Dipper was surprised by the admittedly strange gratitude, "A piece of

shit like me doesn't deserve it. Not after everything that I did the past two months."

"I don't want to be like this with you." Dipper confessed, "But it wouldn't feel right for me to try to excuse your actions."

"I know, I feel the same way." Stan assured, "I wouldn't have let you just brush it all off like that anyway."

"So what now?" Dipper asked, "What happens now?"

"I don't know." The old man shrugged and leaned back in his chair, "Bill's going to bring everyone back as soon as he wakes up and erase any bit of information having to do with the continent-wide black out. You two are welcomed to stay until Sunday like you originally planned, but I understand if you want to leave sooner. I won't blame you for it either."

"I guess it's something I'll have to talk over with Mabel." Dipper sighed.

It really sucked that things had gone so terribly wrong.

Half an hour later, Mabel and Bill finally woke up. Neither were hungry though the latter was a demon and was consequently never hungry. Mabel still munched on something, well aware she had to ingest something for the sake of her body. They sat quietly in the kitchen without exchanging much of a word though, strangely, there was no tension. It was actually comforting for some reason. Maybe it's because they were all together again " or rather most of them were together again. They could begin grieving properly now so as to move on later.

"We should give Grunkle Ford a proper burial." Dipper eventually said. Bill clenched his fists tightly. "He's still in the basement."

"You should also bring all the people who died back." Mabel reminded Bill.

The demon nodded briefly and snapped his fingers. The newspaper at the center of the table vanished and so, as far as they were all concerned, everyone had forgotten. With a second snap of the fingers, the electricity in the house reactivated and they knew Bill had fixed everything yet again.

"Right, well, let's get my brother." Grunkle Stan said and pushed himself from his chair.

The others followed suit as he lead the way to the Mystery Shack store. Bill lagged behind and hesitated to quicken his step. Mabel slowed down to stay by his side and lend support through silence as there was nothing to be said to remedy the situation. Stan pushed past the door and Dipper kept it open for the other two. Then they turned to Stan who was just about to punch in the code into the vending machine when it slid open on its own. Dipper glanced at Mabel and Bill, silently asking them if they had open the door but both shook their heads in equal confusion.

Then they saw him.

"Whatâ€|?" Stan muttered and stumbled back in shock.

Bill went completely rigid. "Is thisâ€|is this some kind of joke?"

In the threshold stood Ford. He looked fine if a bit weak and unstable but he managed to stay upright by supporting himself against the wall. He looked them over tiredly; eyes resting on Bill who simply didn't know how to react.

"Is this some kind of fucked up joke!?" the demon snapped, his voice strained.

"Hi." Ford said with a weak smile.

"Is this for real?" Stan asked incredulously, "Are you reallyâ€|here?"

"Yes." Ford confirmed. He paused before asking: "Uh, what happened to my lab?"

As soon as the question was uttered, Bill threw himself at his lover and held him in a tight hug. He cried tears of joy much to Ford's confusion but he said nothing of it. He simply embraced him back and took a deep breath.

"I swear to god if this is a dreamâ€|" Bill muttered, "I'm going to kill the person who wakes me up."

"You're not dreaming." Ford whispered to him. "I'm really here."

It was a long moment before the two finally broke apart. Once they did, Stan stepped in. He held his brother's look wordlessly. Ford waited, expecting him to say something but, instead he was pulled into a second hug. He was admittedly shocked by the display of affection from the older man and more so when the latter began sobbing.

"I really thought we failedâ€|" he said, "I really thought you were gone forever."

"I'm not. I'm back." Ford smiled.

"Don't you pull shit like that again!" Stan reproached but he hardly meant it. He was so relieved his brother was finally back.

"I won't." He assured with a gentle laugh.

Once Stan released him, Ford's attention turned to Dipper and Mabel. The two hadn't moved a muscle from the moment the man had appeared once the vending machine had moved aside. Neither could believe he was really there. Dipper was waiting for the illusion to fade or for some evil supernatural creature to reveal it had decided to unnecessarily torment them. But it wasn't happening and still he hesitated to believe what he was seeing. He so badly wanted Ford to be there, but it was all too surreal. There was no way. The portal hadn't workedâ€|hadn't it?

"You look like you've seen a ghost." Ford joked lightheartedly.

"Are you sure you're real?" Mabel asked tensely, "Because I really don't want you to be a figment of my imagination right now."

Ford laughed softly and took a step forward. "I'm real, I promise."

"How isâ€|how is this even possible?" Dipper asked. "How did you escape the Void?"

"There was a light." Ford explained, "A bright light. It didn't make any sense. I hesitated to go towards it. Then it began shrinking and I heard Billâ€|I honestly didn't think I would make it in time."

"Soâ€|the portal workedâ€|" Dipper concluded.

"The portalâ€|?" Ford repeated with a frown and glared at his brother, "Was that what that hunk of junk was? Stanley! Was it your idea!? Do you not remember how dangerous I told you it was!?"

That was all it took for Dipper to be convinced that the man in front of them really was Ford and that he was back. He rushed to him and hugged him, Mabel following suit barely a second later. They began weeping and gripped him tightly. There were so many things they wanted to say but all they could do was sob and sob. They were just so happy. It had worked. _The portal had workedâ€|_

And Ford was finally back.

12. And I Must Away

It was clear that things would never be the same, despite the success of Ford's revival. Though Dipper still very much loved and forgave his great uncles Stan and Bill, he would never forget what they had been ready to do â€" _to risk_. Millions of people died and that didn't change even after the demon's second mass resurrection. The only difference was that no Grim Reaper would start dropping bodies anew as it was still trapped inside of Robbie.

Once they had all calmed down, they brought Ford into the living room. They fetched him food and explained everything that had happened. He listened attentively but fired disapproving looks every now and again at his brother and lover. Dipper had been right. Ford would have condemned their activities had he been around to do so. When they finished explaining everything, the man launched himself in an intense rant, reprimanding Bill and Stan but neither seemed to care. They listened and nodded here and there to acknowledge what they were being told but it was so clear they were indifferent. The two were just so happy Ford was finally back. They all were.

The days subsequently passed quickly. The atmosphere within the Mystery Shack had changed greatly. Stan was back to his social self and invited Soos, Melody, and Dan over rather often for a refreshing beverage. He chatted leisurely with them and Dipper couldn't help but perceive it as strange whenever he stumbled upon them. As far as he was concerned, two of the three Stan continuously invited over had been worried sick given his isolated behaviour though were now none the wiser. Bill had made them forget the old man had ever secluded

himself from the rest of the world.

Mabel was also in better spirits. There was no reason to lament over a death that had so recently been reversed. She could now focus her efforts elsewhere and she did. More times than not, Dipper found her skyping with Grenda and Marius who both complained about their workloads. Sometimes, the latter two would take their laptop outside to show her the breathtaking view they had of Vienna at night.

As for Bill, he hardly ever left Ford's side. Honestly, none of them really did. Though from time to time they would do their own things, whether it be chatting with friends over a nice beverage or crappy internet connection, they would always do it within Ford's vicinity. Dipper could tell he was annoyed by that. He couldn't get anything done in peace and quiet, but he never complained about it. The teen assumed it was because the other man understood why they were acting the way they were. Whether he remembered it or not, Ford had been dead for nearly four months and after they had launched the portal to bring him back, they had been certain it hadn't worked.

Regardless, the demon refused to do much of anything if his lover wasn't by his side. He was always found literally hanging off Ford or hovering around him. He became very attentive to his requests and even if Ford didn't always explicitly ask for something, Bill would give it to him in a heartbeat. It was endearing until the Shack quickly filled up with ridiculous things because Ford had recollected wanting something he had never gotten once upon a time and Bill had teleported it in. By the end of the week, the house looked like it was inhabited by hoarders until Ford demanded the things be cast away.

And though things were quite joyous and lighthearted; Dipper was upset to see that things weren't quite as nice and lovely as they ought to be. The reason for that was obvious and didn't necessitate much thought. Everything was back to normal now, but just a few short days ago, Bill had violently grabbed him by the throat and tossed him out of a room whereas Stan had been willing to let them die if it meant saving his own brother. It didn't matter that he understood why they did what they did; it didn't change that the demon had abruptly gotten terrifyingly aggressive whereas his great uncle had doomed them not to mention the rest of the universe.

Their relationships had changed forever. They weren't necessarily ruined, but they definitely weren't what they had once been.

"So hey," Bill began as he floated about in their attic room. The twins were located at their respective beds, organising their luggage, "How did you two get out of my magic prison anyway? I mean, no offense, Shooting Star, but you weren't strong enough to break out."

"None taken." She smiled.

"It was me." Dipper claimed.

"Ha! Bullshit!" The demon scoffed, "You haven't even unlocked your magic yet! Even if you had, Shooting Star would have had a better chance at breaking free!"

"It's true!" Dipper insisted, "I can teleport!"

"Un-hun. Sure. And _I'm_ an angel!" Bill retorted sarcastically.

Dipper glanced at Mabel who met his eyes and offered him a grin. "You really don't believe me?" he challenged and Bill nodded, "Look out the window."

The demon frowned but floated to the triangular window and glanced out. Dipper then closed his eyes and envisioned where he wanted to be. Shortly after, he found himself on the lawn which could be viewed from the window of their attic room. Bill's face was priceless and he could hear Mabel howling with laughter at his stupefied expression. Dipper then closed his eyes and teleported back to his room.

"Oh my god!" Bill shouted, "You can teleport!?"

"I told you!" Dipper grinned.

"You frigging dingus!" Bill scolded and smacked Dipper's head, "Why didn't you tell me!? You could have gotten stuck in a wall or worse! Teleportation is dangerous!"

"Ow!" Dipper protested and rubbed the sore spot at the top of his head, "Well, to be fair, we weren't exactly on the same side and, before that, you went missing."

"When did this all start?" Bill asked curiously.

"Last summer. When I went to save Robbie, I think." Dipper mused.

"Did you experience any lapses in time too?" Bill asked and now that Dipper thought of it, he often felt like he was losing time whenever he was meditating.

"Yeah, a little." He admitted.

"What does that mean?" Mabel asked.

"It means he awoke his power the first time he lost time." Bill explained, "Think of it like the Legend of Zelda."

Dipper rolled his eyes at the videogame reference.

"Shut your face, Pine Tree!" Bill retorted, "It's super relevant, okay!? So in the Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time, Link travels through time seven years into the future and back frequently. That's essentially how your power first manifested itself."

"Dipper time traveled?" Mabel asked, confused.

"No, have you ever even played that game?" The demon scoffed in indignation, "It's later explained in the game that what Link did wasn't actually time travel as much as it was his soul teleporting to his body seven years in the future while it slept in the Temple of Time."

"So my soul teleported to my future body?" Dipper asked.

"Yup. It's how the power first manifests itself." Bill confirmed with a proud nod, "You've got a special type of magic, kiddo. Not everyone can teleport."

Dipper grinned and stared at his hands. "That's awesome."

"Eh, not quite." Bill added, "Between you and your sister, your sister's more special. Most of the time when someone awakes their magical potential they're immediately attributed one ability. It's rare for someone to be able to choose what their speciality will be. I thought it might be common for people who didn't have the Gift but I guess I was wrong."

"Does that meanâ€¦I can't learn any other kind of magic?" Dipper asked.

"Basically." The demon confirmed. "But hey, teleportation's useful. Think of all the stuff you can steal! You and your sister would make a heck of an intense duo too!"

"I guess." Dipper muttered in disappointment. Had he had the option to choose his specialisation, he would have opted for alteration or alchemic magic.

"Come on." The demon smiled, "I'll show you how to teleport like a champ. You'll also make good target practice for your sister."

"Target practice!?" Dipper squeaked.

"Wait, I have to start training again?" Mabel whined.

Eventually, Sunday came around. Though the twins were supposed to return to California and resume university, neither embarked on the bus meant to bring them home. The two decided to drop out for the rest of the year and try their luck again next year. Though their parents wouldn't understand, they deserved a break. After everything that happened, some of the decisions they had once been set on had to be reevaluated. Dipper wasn't sure he would pursue his original program and he had to decide what else he would do if not cryptozoology.

"I'm not sure fashion is what I want to do with my life." Mabel declared as she came up behind her brother. He was seated on the front porch, staring at the stars. The night was cold but bearable with a decent sweater. The tea Mabel had brought also helped.

"Really? Don't you love that stuff?" Dipper asked and took his steaming mug. The heat pleasantly tingled at his hands.

"Yeah, but I love a lot of things." She remarked as she sat next to him. "It's just I don't know if I'll still love fashion if it becomes my job. I mean, what if it turns into a chore? Where's the fun in that?"

Good point. Dipper thought as he sipped at his beverage. Earl grey. His favourite.

"I also don't believe I'll feel as fulfilled if I pursue fashion."

Mabel added a bit more quietly, "Especially when I know I have the potential to do something great."

"Sounds like you want to get into the supernatural business." Dipper chuckled.

"Wellâ€¦maybe I do." She admitted.

Dipper paused before bursting into laughter. Amazing. What were the odds?

"Why are you laughing?" Mabel demanded, puffing out her cheeks angrily.

"This is just too funny!" He laughed, "You're considering going into the paranormal whereas I'm considering taking on something more _normal_. It's like we're just switching spots or something."

"I guess that's kind of funny," Mabel smiled and sipped at her tea. She made a face after presumably burning her upper lip. "Why are you out of love with it?"

"We've been through a lot." Dipper said softly, "We stopped three Apocalypses â€" actually, we failed in stopping the third one, the only reason the world didn't end was out of sheer luck. The point is, I don't know how many situations like that I can take."

"I see where you're coming from." Mabel acknowledged, "But if _we_ don't do something, then who will?"

"How would we even make a carrier in that?" Dipper asked.

"We could travel the country â€" heck, the _world_, and help people with supernatural problems." Mabel suggested, "We would live in a car and embark on the greatest road trip of our lives. Think about it, who else is going to help someone with an annoying goblin or pesky ghost?"

"And would we get paid?" Dipper asked, unconvinced.

"Sure, but we ought to just ask people to give within their means though." Mabel answered excitedly and the more she indulged in this insane fantasy, the more she got motivated, "We can always milk more from our richer clients, you know?"

"That sounds insane." Dipper chuckled.

"Maybe, but it would be fun." She pointed out.

"Yeah, I guess it would." Dipper smiled lightly.

Whatever happened, they would be okay. Having dealt with two Armageddons and narrowly avoiding a third one; they really had to believe that everything would work out in the end. For better or for worse, everything would be alright.

End
file.